Majid Lashkari

# The Theatre and Cinema of Arby Ovanessian

Foreword by

**Peter Brook**

Translated from the Persian by

**Mahasti Afshar**

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# The Theatre and Cinema of Arby Ovanessian

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## Translator's Note

*The Theatre and Cinema of Arby Ovanessian* was originally published by Majid Lashkari in Iran in 2014 in two volumes. I volunteered to translate his book into English if he provided me with an abridged version, which he did in 2018.

A hardcover edition of my translation was published by HARATCH Educational and Social Foundation in Yerevan, Armenia, in 2021. It included forty-four new images — with captions and added copy marked by faulty English and stylistic errors throughout — without my prior knowledge or permission. The gratuitous breach of my rights has compelled me to post my original translation online.

Titles of plays and films are abbreviated in the format *English*/Persian and indexed accordingly, e.g., *A Knight*/Savāri, *All at Once*/Nāgahan, *Research*/Pazhuheshi , *The Spring*/Cheshmeh.

**Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| AC | Ararat Club |
| ATA | Armenian Theatre Association (Paris) |
| BITEF | Belgrade International Theatre Festival |
| CPG | City Players Group (*Gorouh-e Bazigaran-e Shahr*) |
| CRT | Crossroads Theatre (*Teatr-e Chahar-su*) |
| CT | City Theatre (*Teatr-e Shahr*) |
| IAS | Iran America Society (Tehran) |
| ICTR | International Center for Theatre Research |
| ITI | International Theatre Institute |
| NIRT | National Iranian Radio and Television |
| NITF | Nancy International Theatre Festival |
| NITV | National Iranian Television |
| TW | Theatre Workshop (*Kārgāh-e Nemayesh*) |

# Foreword

Arby is exceptional. I have only to hear his name and a kaleidoscope of impressions whirl in my head.

The Maison de l'Iran on the Champs Elysées was renowned for its caviar. It is here that in 1970, the Shiraz Festival, knowing that Arby and myself had already heard of each other's work and were interested by each other, arranged to bring us together.

Our as-yet unformed International Center of Theatre Research had already been invited to make our opening manifestation in Persepolis the following year and the meeting with Arby was the first step. I found a discreet and modest young man before me. I had already learned that he was a brilliant director and the white hope of the Iranian theatre. A long conversation followed. Next came a visit to Teheran and it was here that Arby offered to take me across the country to Neyshabur. It was a tough journey, but day after day, Arby opened like a fan and from him I began to learn about the country, its culture and its traditions. Despite difficulties, Arby took me to a village where sitting amongst the villagers we watched a Ta'azieh, an unknown word which now became a deeply moving experience and Arby opened to me a new, completely unknown aspect of Islam. This led us to the tomb of Attar—especially touching as I had for long been searching for a way of finding a theatre form for The Conference of the Birds. Before going back to Teheran, we visited the Haram Mashad Moghadas.

Now, back to Paris and Arby came with me for a short visit. It was clear we needed him to be part of the international group that was just coming together.

Then, again, to Teheran. Now I could see Arby's work with his own actors in a production of dazzling beauty. Also, I could see his films, typically imaginative, sensitive and uncompromising with an imagery and a tempo all of their own.

I spoke of the work I hoped to explore when our Centre group began and described our first aim—to discover the essential sounds and vibrations common to all languages, carrying the deep meaning behind the different words.

At once, Arby spoke of a remarkable lady, Mahin Tajadod, who had made a deep study of how the letters of the ancient language of Zoroaster, Avestan, were diagrams of the inner paths the breath has to make to make the sounds vibrate. Mahin became a friend for life and an essential partner in our fir project 'Orghast'.

Arby returned once again to Paris and was soon a much-valued participant in our exercises and experiments. 'Orghast' demanded our developing fragments of old legends as a dramatic basis. Arby at once introduced us to the great Armenian writer Shanth and his play 'The Chained One' which linked thematically with Calderon's 'Life's a Dream'. Hearing the Armenian's words inspired the English poet Ted Hughes who was developing a sound language of his own which together with ancient Greek and Avestan could penetrate directly to the sub-conscious.

As our aim was to reach a form, we could play in the ruins of Persepolis it became clear we needed to bring Iranian actors together with our group composed of so many varied cultures. So, Arby returned to Teheran to prepare actors he knew, so that when we reached Iran, we could all work together.

Eventually, this company was prepared to take on the challenge of playing 'Orghast' all night long, first in the ruined temple of Persepolis and then until dawn in the Valley of the Kings.

I could tell so much of this period, but I must cut a long story short. When the Iranian revolution occurred, Arby was by chance in Berlin. He came over to Paris where he settled to this day.

As our friendship developed, I could watch Arby gliding effortlessly between theatre and cinema, theory and practice, between professionals and amateurs, between so many social and cultural levels, as truly the Armenian of his heritage as the Iranian in him who was truly Persian.

To this day, his knowledge astonishes me. He is both a man of the East and of the West, open equally to the visible and the invisible worlds. He observed the currents of the time with a fine discriminating intelligence, but he was never caught up in the various tendencies, always remaining free.

Arby's fingers also were the servants of his mind and feeling—he could design, build, carve and convert forms whenever necessary.

A close creative relation developed with my other intimate friend, Grotowski and here again it never led—as was so common—to devotion or imitation.

Arby would watch my own work and to this day he is always very critical. He followed all that was new in theatre and cinema but was never satisfied. Praise was rare.

Open to this world and to other worlds, visible and invisible, what dominates is the human being within. Tender, sensitive, yet inexhaustibly knowledgeable, Arby is a close and dearly loved friend. I return to my opening words—he is exceptional.

Peter Brook

25 July 2011

## Introduction

In my youth, before moving to the capital to study for a university degree in Theatre Directing, I had not seen any serious stage performances, only humdrum popular comedy, given that I lived in a provincial city. But fortunately, I had read most works by Iranian playwrights. In one book, I came across a brief description of an avant-garde writer whose name I hadn't heard before, Abbas Nalbandian—a young man working in his father's newspaper stand whose first controversial play had won the Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition and who had ended his life by his own hands.

Initially, the long and strange titles of his plays aroused my curiosity to look for and read his works. I found his scarce books with great difficulty and was deeply affected by the astonishing brand of imagination, unique theatrical frame of mind, and the magic of Nalbandian's creative writings. In them, I had found what for me had been missing in plays that had come before him and since, essentially a sort of inversion. His plays seemed totally different from what had been experienced in our theatre in the past, and unstageable. Strangely, a query sprang up inside me like the invisible motion of blood in the veins under the skin whose source I did not know. Who has been able to stage these plays and bring their hidden landscape to light? I came across the name of Arby Ovanessian. A current toward touching the unknown was set in motion for me.

*Who is Arby? Why isn't he mentioned in any book? Why are there so many vague and contradictory comments about the exceptional and modern artistic developments, such as the Shiraz Arts Festival or the founding of several new theatre centers for experimentation and advancement in Iranian theatre?* I had no idea what path to take to find answers to my questions; I didn't even know Ovanessian was alive and living in Europe.

Throughout my student years, I pursued my inquiry like a secret without anyone being in the know. When I contacted some of his former actors at the start of my research, they either didn't trust me or dodged recollecting the past. It was as if the rupture that the revolution had brought on that generation had rendered their arts and cultural past irrelevant. In that sealed space whose existence was to be kept from others as if a taboo, a few, however, agreed to talk. Around the same time, I heard about Arby's arrival in Iran and told one of his actors; he couldn't believe it at all and said: there's no way he'll come back to Iran.

*But why?*

Till, after a twenty-five-year absence from his country, without any news or media coverage, Arby came to Tehran from Paris. I got myself to the airport eagerly to be able to see him closeup in that moment and for the impossible to happen for me. Our encounter took place wordlessly in total silence and we merely stared at each other. A few days after that meeting in silence, one of his friends who had seen me at the airport arranged for us to meet. A record of our conversation appears in **First Encounter** below, followed by a **Biographic Profile of the Artist in Iran** and an **Appendix** that lists his works abroad since 1979.

Before my book took shape, no other publication in Iran had examined a theatre director's method from different viewpoints or from a director's perspective. Thus, I didn't have a model either. On the one hand, Ovanessian's work constituted a slice of time in theatre and cinema that given the break induced by the revolution had been abandoned or forgotten. This chasm had grown wider, even in compilations covering the history of cinema and theatre, and the arts and cultural legacy of the past had been intentionally whitewashed or dismissed. A researcher's job is to explore and present and reflect facts; the physical absence and the begrudging migration of artists like him away from their homeland is no reason to ignore their works, nor proof of the absence of their thinking or influence. The reason for my choice of research subject was to grapple with a question I was unable to shake off my mind, namely, how did the works of this artist take shape? Under what circumstances were they significant and had, or still have, an impact? And why has such a legacy been ignored?

The outcome of my seven years of research to answer those questions is a 2-volume, 1,000-page book that I published in collaboration with Rowzaneh in Iran in late 2014. Carrying the same title as the present abridged English version, it is a berth of diverse opinions and facts, plus historical records that include a compilation of critical reviews and writings, as well as interviews that I conducted with his collaborators, critics, and with himself. When I presented the material to several publishers for their review and consideration, they at first showed great interest, but I gradually learned that they were also afraid to take it on. For two and a half wasteful years, out of fear of confiscation or rejection, or of earning negative points due to censorship, the manuscript was stranded in the myriad entanglements that are the staple of the cultural sphere. Until one day, I withdrew it and submitted it for permits in my own name as author-publisher.

Everyone knows that lies and rumors, failure to study history, or loss of historical memory leads to misinterpretations and gradually, to the society's demise. Based on rumors and inaccurate portrayals in the past, multiple objections were raised to the subject of my book and they made its publication contingent. I wrote ten pages of responses and a defense of the book for the bureau of censorship and book administration in the hope that I might be able to refute and correct their perception of Arby and the marginalia posted about him on the Internet by referencing historical records. With that initiative, I was finally able to obtain the permit in my own name. There was no fear for the publisher anymore, and the book was published, albeit three years had elapsed for no good reason. Even when news organizations learned about the book and the launch event, some went on the attack and continuing to spread rumors against Ovanessian extended the orbit of their opposition to the cultural entity that had issued the permit. Despite having an official permit and although the initial run was distributed in a short time, that opposition forced the second printing of the book to be suspended, a hurdle that still holds. In the same year, the book won best prize for research in the festival of the Iranian Association of Writers and Theatres Critics.

Arby Ovanessian has always been a seeker and finder of new paths in art and pursued a search for the unknown dimensions of being and existence. On the strength and the growth of his work, he has worked tenaciously to give form to profound thoughts about humanity and life and in the process has always preserved the authentic Iranian soul and his Armenian culture in his work with graceful elegance. It is my hope that this book may be an illuminating portrait for understanding the varied facets of an undivided effort by an individual who as the leader of several theatre ensembles was able to be not only an influential vanguard in directing and stage design in Iran, but who also crossed international frontiers.

Although Ovanessian's films are very few, his command of the language of cinema is exemplary. He effortlessly challenged standard cinematic conventions with his first feature film alone and became a filmmaker endowed with a personal and poetic language. Thus, the same film served as a beacon for

New Wave cinema in Iran and ushered a new chapter in alternative cinematic expression for directors of his own and future generations.

The present English edition is a digest of the Persian version arranged in a new form where the reader can trace the methods of a distinctive theatre director and the relationships that characterized his production environment, as well as his dynamic trajectory in cultivating actors, and his cinematic techniques.

The chapters on theatre and cinema include a selection of interviews that I personally conducted over several years and essays that I solicited for the book, as well as historical records, including published reviews of Ovanessian's works. Thus, **Theatre I** and **Cinema I**: **Collaborators, Commentators and Critics,** comprise observations, opinions and reviews as well as my personal interviews with theatre and film professionals affiliated with Ovanessian, and in **Theatre II**, with his **Actors**.

**Theatre III: Selected Interviews with Arby Ovanessian** and **Theatre IV: Selected Writings of Arby Ovanessian** are sourced from the large volume of historical records I compiled in the course of my research.

All the entries noted above have been organized by date. Excepting interviews that I conducted personally, all other interviewers and the source and date of the respective publications have been noted at the top of each entry.

**Theatre V** and **Cinema III: Images** of Ovanessian's plays and films, respectively, represent only a fraction of what I collected from different photographers and reproduced in the original, two-volume Persian edition. The historical images served my inquiry as essential sources of reference; they also prompted some of the questions that I put to the interviewees and therefore played a key role in helping me better understand Ovanessian's work. In this volume, all images are laid out by date to help illustrate the mises en scène and productions described by the different interlocuters. Each section ends with a **Closeup** of Ovanessian as depicted by other artists.

The last chapter, **Epilogue**, a personal letter from Ovanessian, is a self-explanatory book end to **First Encounter**.

Readers interested in learning more about the subject may wish to consult **Further Reading**, which includes studies on theatre and film that reference Ovanessian, as well as a selection of his own publications.

Finally, the **Index** includes personal and place names as well as titles of plays and films and is designed to help readers trace and compare information and commentary on the same subject across the book.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Farhad Mohandesspour, theatre director and my thesis advisor at Sooreh University in Tehran who a decade ago accepted a segment of my monograph on Ovanessian in fulfillment of my graduation requirement.

It gives me pride and pleasure to see my book take on another life in a new form today, thanks to Mahasti Afshar's translation and interest. The English edition has opened a window for contact and a sense of presence and connectedness with a wider public in a language whose speakers have sought to learn about our Eastern culture and spread their knowledge beyond linguistic borders.

Majid Laskhari

December 2018

# Prologue

# I

## First Encounter[1]

**— Tehran, 6 February 2003 —**

**Arby Ovanessian asked me, "Why did you want to research my work?" I said, "The idea occurred to me when I was writing about innovative theatre and film directors in Iran before the 1979 Revolution. To get to know them, I started to research. Then I decided to focus on you and began studying and finding reviews related to your work."**

There are conflicting reviews of my work in the press . . .

**My plan was to interview colleagues and actors first and then correspond with you. I didn't know you were coming to Iran. I heard the news at the last minute and went to the airport to meet you. Miss Berberians— we didn't know each other — noticed my camera. She advised me not to take photographs because, she said, you were returning after an absence of several years and had not wished the press to be informed; you might take me for a reporter. She called me a few days later and arranged today's interview.**

Thank you very much for going out to Mehrabad Airport. (*Pause*). In addition to speaking to actors, there are interviews, reviews, and images of the productions that you can look for. Not much has survived; most of the material has been thrown away.

**I couldn't find all your program brochures.**

If I find them, you can have them later if you wish.

**As I show him some printed materials that I had found in the CT library, I tell him I had difficulty finding the rest and that many of his translations are unpublished. Examining the materials, he says, looking surprised:**

You were told this is my translation?

**The old publications were in disorder over there and in poor condition, stacked in a corner.[2] This one was labeled: "Translation by Arby Ovanessian". I wasn't aware you had translated this text; it says, 'One act from . . .'**

*The Ancient Gods,* yes, it's a poor translation, I know it. I have a good memory (*laughs*). I never

[1] This time-pressed meeting with Arby Ovanessian took place at the home of Miss Lida Berberians as an introduction and to set up follow-up interviews. In a telephone call a few days later, he did not respond positively to my request to arrange future meetings. Therefore, once he returned to Paris, my work developed along a different path, which was to interview his colleagues. Three and a half years later, he learned from Iraj Zohari of my work and asked me to contact him.

[2] A few months after seeing the dismal state of the CT library, which was operating without a director, I submitted a proposal to the Iranology Foundation as a library member. With the foundation's support and the help of one staff, we made two copies of the print material for preservation at the CT library. Unfortunately, the library's new director claimed ownership of this plan in the media. That put an end to my interest.

translated this play. *The Chained One* is the only work by Levon Shant that I translated.

**I show him copies of the newspaper and journal reviews that I had collected and organized.**

Do you have their publication dates?

**Only a few . . .** (*he examines them carefully in silence.*)

. . . I don't have these.

**Were any of your theatre productions filmed?**

A television recording of *Research*/Pazhuheshi was done by Parviz Kimiavi. *Vīs o Ramin* was also taped by National Iranian Television (NITV). I worked on *Self-Accusation* for TV myself. I did not give permission for my other works to be taped.

**Was any of your work at the Theatre Workshop/*Kargah-e Nemayesh* (TW) taped?**

I was against it. I didn't believe in recording stage productions. For dramatic expressions to be effective on television or in film, they need to be reconceived. A direct recording on film or tape is not sufficient; the theatrical essence of the work gets lost. I was for taping *As We Were* because I believed its mise en scène was cinematographic; the same was true of *Little Eyolf* and *The Sleeper's Den*, but the opportunity did not come up. *Caligula* was impossible to film because the camera could not register its essence and theatrical impact.

**Because it loses its theatrical nature and theatre is transformed into something else?**

Yes, I mean the theatrical instance and the happening . . . Well, we didn't have much spare time in those days. The plays in repertory were presented alternately in the course of the season. The group always had five or six productions on hand. To maintain quality demanded special rehearsals and preparations. The actors were trained to perform different plays in diverse styles while maintaining quality. Taping them for TV required extra time and training, which couldn't fit into our schedule.

**Are there any video copies of your films?**

Not of my short films. *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, however, was transferred by the Iranian National Film Archives to video after the Revolution, but they cut the opening minutes of the first reel. There's another defective copy in the U.S., distributed without a license, where the soundtrack of the fourth reel is from the first reel; it's copied from a defective print that was made at the NITV laboratory. That print was supposed to be discarded, but Bahman Maghsoudlou got a hold of it and distributed it commercially in the U.S. — and caused much confusion.[3]

[3] In recent years, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh and *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus* have appeared on CD and DVD as well, but neither is complete. *Cinémathèque française* has a complete copy of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, with French subtitles.

**What was the mission of TW, and how did it start?** (*points to the top of a page in the TW brochure*):

"To help writers, actors, directors and designers exercise and experiment independently of commonly accepted professional restrictions." What restrictions? Clichéd conventions and attitudes, jealousies, and the political ideas that were in vogue. [4]

**Do you mean there was a lack of experimental work?**

The Ministry of Arts and Culture — which was the chief sponsor and arbiter of theatre — promoted certain personalities and long-established conventions and paid no attention to other perspectives, or to newcomers or unknown individuals.

TW was founded owing to two productions, *Research*/Pazhuheshi,[5] and *City of Tales*/Shahr-e Qesseh.[6] These types of plays and productions had no chance to be presented in theatres or to grow and flourish in Iran. Khojasteh Kia[7] proposed creating a theatre workshop. Fereydoun Rahnema[8] and I developed the idea and presented it to Mr. Reza Ghotbi[9]. He approved and proposed that Bijan Mofid and I take on the project. Mofid was not in a position to collaborate as he had recently disbanded his group, and I responded that I couldn't do it on my own. Mr. Manuchehr Anvar introduced his brother, Iraj, a theatre director who had done experimental work with Alessandro Fersen in Italy. Iraj Anvar was working on Genet's *Death Watch*/Haute Surveillance; he joined the team and in turn introduced Shahru Kheradmand whom he had met at Fersen's workshop.

To prevent personal biases from interfering in TW's artistic orientation, we needed a general director who was well-versed in the cultural domain, including the dramatic arts, but not a theatre director. Bijan Saffari[10] fit the profile.

I agreed to work for three years without a salary. Khojasteh Kia, Fereydoun Rahnema, and I wrote the bylaws and the founding of TW was sealed.

In searching for a workplace, Bijan Saffari and I found an old building across the Franco-Iranian Institute; it was in a beautiful garden, had a few small rooms, and rented for 60,000 Rials/mo. We then heard that the second and third floors of the late Master Janbazian's ballet school on Kalantari Street, which had been leased to the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, was now available for 50,000 Rials/mo.

There were three rooms on the third floor. Following Bijan Saffari's design, two were merged to

[4] For a detailed history of TW, see the BBC Persian interview with Arby Ovanessian, *Kārgāh-e Nemayesh*, filmed at the Royal Court Theatre on 27 Mar. 2014 (57 mins.). Elmira Rastegar, director; Babak Salek, editor; Will Jacob, camera.

[5] *Research*/Pazhuheshi by Abbas Nalbandian, second prize winner of the first Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition, premiered at the festival on 5 Sep. 1968.

[6] Bijan Mofid's *City of Tales* premiered at the Shiraz Arts Festival on 12 Sep. 1968.

[7] Playwright and researcher on drama and mythology, she was an influential figure in the formation of contemporary Iranian theatre and served as president of the Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition jury that included Arby Ovanessian, Azemat Jhanti, Davoud Rashidi, Fereydoun Rahnema, and Manuchehr Anvar.

[8] Fimmaker, poet, and director of the Research and Drama Department at NITV (later NIRT); an influential figure in promoting new poetry and cinema in pre-revolution Iran.

[9] NITV general manager and director general of the Shiraz Arts Festival. Ghotbi assembled cultural and technical experts and artists at NITV (renamed NIRT after merging with Radio Iran in 1971) and at several satellite operating programs in music, theatre, and film, and applying best practices in management, advanced the artistic domain in Iran exponentially.

[10] Architect, artist, highly erudite academic; TW director; and adviser to NITV/NIRT and the Shiraz Arts Festival.

form a performance space with a 50-120 seating capacity. Seating could be configured as needed using portable wooden platforms. The third room was dedicated to rehearsals. Lighting equipment was installed on the balcony of the same floor. On the second floor, there was one small rehearsal/exhibition room, one office, a small reading/meeting room, a small room for the caretaker, a bathroom, and a kitchen.

So that Nalbandian could devote his time to writing and have an income stream once he quit his job selling newspapers, he was appointed manager and placed in charge of TW's publications.[11]

**What was TW's inaugural production?**

The first production was *Oedipus, Oedipus*, co-directed by Shahru Kheradmand and Iraj Anvar. The effort represented the type of collaborative work that TW aspired to. Jerzy Grotowski — who was in Iran to select a venue with Bijan Saffari's help for his upcoming production of *The Constant Prince* at the fourth Shiraz Arts Festival — saw the production. He spoke at TW about his work in Poland; this was the first meeting where Grotowski gave a talk to researchers and fans of theatre in Iran. I then staged *Beckett 5*. That was the second production at TW for people interested in experimental and research-oriented theatre.

**Were the actors paid?**

The working groups were not paid at the start, but they had free access to rehearsal space. Once they presented their work to the council, if it was deemed to have potential, they would start receiving a small fee, enough to cover their cost of public transportation. They could then invite their friends to see a try-out, which if well-received, would be added to the repertory. At that point they were given the opportunity to form a more permanent group. That's when they became salaried, meaning that some time and effort was required before they could be on contract. Some would decide to stay while others would quit.

**How did the audience respond to TW?**

People who enjoyed The Street Theatre Group/*Gorouh-e Kucheh's* works[12] were not necessarily attracted to Beckett, for instance. But because these works were part of TW's repertory, the outcome was often a revelation for the audience, who then established healthy relationships with both. In addition, the effect of this new work environment was reciprocal, which is one of the reasons TW grew and flourished. Watching other people's work affected Esma'il Khalaj's own plays, for instance. His translation of Edward Bond's *Saved*, which he undertook with Maryam Khalvati, is one of the best Persian translations of a play.

A number of foreign plays staged at TW were seen in Iran before they appeared in the U.S. or Europe. For the first time, we were not mere consumers of the foreign dramatic canon. We were in alignment with what was evolving around the world.

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[11] After the 1979 Revolution, baseless accusations by revolutionaries landed Nalbandian (b. 1947) in prison for months. Following his release, he was hit by a motorcyclist and underwent a splenectomy. Once discharged from the hospital, he remained unemployed and impoverished for years and in the end, on 28 May 1987, took his own life. He made an audiotape recording of his final moments as his last will and testament.

[12] The Street Theatre Group mostly performed works by Esma'il Khalaj.

**As best I know, your collaboration with Peter Brook started after *Research*/Pazhuheshi.**

Yes, it's after seeing that production that he invited me to collaborate with the International Center for Theatre Research (ICTR). Up to that point, I had done independent work in theatre for four years in Iran.

In Iran, it was typical to doubt that a person could be original; if they did something uncommon, the assumption was that they had copied a model. That mindset and presumption regulated how people saw everything. *Research*/Pazhuheshi was produced three years before *Orghast*, which itself borrowed an element from *Vīs o Ramin*, namely, weaving the setting of the sun and real time into the mise en scène.

**Had the sunset and real time ever been utilized in theatre before? Where did the idea come from?**

The idea was born from a simple event. During the third Shiraz Festival, a group of us had gone to Persepolis to choose a location for *Vīs o Ramin*. On watching the sun go down over the ruins, I said, "It's impossible to put on a play before such magnificent scenery; let people come and watch this; this itself is theatre." Mr. Reza Ghotbi said, "Why don't you do that?" I replied, "To do that, the mise en scène would have to be aligned with the sunset; it should start at sundown — at the hour that the festival usually opens every year — and end in darkness." He agreed, and that is how *Vīs o Ramin* was conceived.

**What do you mean by mise en scène?**

*Mise en scène* — "put on the stage" in French — means making visible and giving body to the core, invisible features of the play, setting in motion all the elements found in the time, space, and the subject of the play.

**You were particularly sensitive to the venue and chose ones that were compatible with your work, such as your production of *The Cherry Orchard* at Bagh-e Ferdows, 'Garden of Paradise'.[13]**

If these plays were staged elsewhere, they would have taken a different form. For example, we performed six or seven variants of *All at Once*/Nāgahan. The work's core and essence remained constant, but its form and appearance varied, depending on the venue and the audience.

**Miss Berberians walks in with a platter of cookies and tea.**

It's like whether tea is served in a cup or a glass. The content is the same, but cultural customs change the relationships and . . .

[13] A historical landmark in Tajrish, northern Tehran, originally built by order of Mohammad Shah Qajar in 1848 and named *Mohammadieh*. The estate was refurbished and named *Ferdows* by a later owner, Hosseinali Khan Mu'ayyer ul-Mamalek. The present mansion, built by his son, Doostali Khan Nezam ud-Dowleh, changed hands and usage several times and gradually fell into neglect. It was renovated in the early 1970s and served NIRT, the Shiraz Arts Festival, and the Center for the Study of Cultures. Since 1979, the complex has housed the Iranian Museum of Cinema.

**The presentations vary . . .**

Yes, without changing the substance and the core. For instance, in Shiraz, the audience circled *All at Once*/Nāgahan but at Nancy and at City Theatre in Tehran they faced the stage. *Caligula* premiered in the ruins of Persepolis at Tachareh within the gates of the private quarters of Darius' palace. Then the space changed at CT and gates were transformed into guillotines — as an allusion to the French Revolution — and so on.

**How did the Shiraz Arts Festival begin, and how did it come to include theatre?** [14]

The first festival was held in 1967; there was no theatre, only *Ta'ziyeh Horr*. Theatre was added to the program in the second year with *Research*/Pazhuheshi and *City of Tales*/Shahr-e Qesseh. Prior to that, the festival had organized a playwriting competition and invited submissions. Among the texts we reviewed, some believed that *Research*/Pazhuheshi did not lend itself to being staged. I disagreed, and to prove my point asked to be given two weeks to work on the first half with my Persian-speaking actors. The text was thus handed to me.

They saw the result and asked me to do the second half as well. When it was done, the Shiraz Festival program committee — a different body from the playwriting competition jury — watched the work and selected it for presentation at the festival along with the *City of Tales*, then a work in progress at Khane-ye Pishahangi, a Scouts branch house in Tehran.

The fourth festival was dedicated to theatre and ritual; Brook was invited to present his films, and Grotowski, *The Constant Prince*. I knew both of them from my student days in film and had also seen a short film about Grotowski[15] — that was the first time his work at the Laboratory Theatre was seen outside Poland. Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre was also invited from the U.S. Bijan Saffari also invited *The Maids,* directed by Victor Garcia, when we saw it at Cité Universitaire in Paris during our trip to the seventh Royan International Festival of Contemporary Art to present *Research*/Pazhuheshi.

The inaugural program of the fourth festival was *Vīs o Ramin*, a play for which Mahin Tajadod had won third prize in the Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition two years earlier.

**How did the divergent styles of TW's work affect people? How was the public reception?**

The audience formed and evolved in concert with the writers, actors and directors as they evolved at TW. We established a membership system from year one because the only legal mechanism for circumventing censorship was to operate within the framework of a club.[16] Since NITV was in charge of TW, we were able to bypass the Department of Publications' and the Ministry of Arts and Culture's restrictions. Thus, interested individuals were able to join as members and buy advance tickets. For self-evaluation, we processed questionnaires and tabulated the programs and attendance.

[14] For an illustrated report on the festival's mission, organization, and programs in music, theatre, dance, and film, see Mahasti Afshar, "Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis, 1967-77: *OR you better believe in as many as six impossible things before breakfast*," *Asia Society/New York Symposium*, 5 Oct. 2013, updated on academia.edu in May 2015, and a later book in Persian, *Jashn-e Honar-e Shiraz*. Mage: 2024.

[15] *A Postcard from Opole* (1965), directed by Michael Elster, an English student at the Polish Film School.

[16] Private clubs or societies were created in Europe to avert censorship starting in 1887; British theatres used the practice until the mid-1970s. *Research*/Pazhuheshi was presented before members of the Royal Court Theatre in London where The English Stage Society first created a membership program in 1956.

Public reception was very warm, and the performances were mostly sold out. Once members had gone through the repertory, attendance would drop, but if a work was promising, we kept presenting it even before a small audience. They would tell their friends and family and a new wave of audiences would form. The point is, we and the audience grew together.

To give you an example, the productions of Peter Handke's plays were very popular to start with, but over time, attendance fell to a minimum — one time, we performed for an audience of only three. The plays were in repertory for three and a half years, two or three nights a month. This gave people who had missed them a chance to catch up; with every new cycle, the play would be performed before a full house again. This was one of the benefits of repertory.

Of course, sustaining a performance for over three years is an enormous challenge. When rerun for a long time, its quality tends to diminish. Our motto was that every production is a work in progress. Once a work lost its creative force for the actors and the audience, we removed it from repertory.

One thing you may find interesting in the brochures is the variety of programs, directors, and production styles; the brochures give you a sense of our agenda. Mutual trust and professional respect allowed people with diverse sensibilities to co-exist in a small space and work together as part of one or more groups. Actors could move from one group to another as needed, but if they were a good fit for a particular group, that's where they would concentrate their work.

**In what ways did various TW groups influence the quality and nature of each other's work?**

TW groups influenced each other in a variety of ways. They shared their observations and discussed the staging and quality of the works. This resulted in some cross-influences of techniques and ideas and enriched the collective, but the groups remained distinct in their directing systems, sensibilities, idiosyncrasies, and vision. That wasn't the case outside TW where productions looked diverse but in fact mirrored similar acting styles, modes of expression and mindsets, and embraced clichés and stereotypes.

In the mid=1960s, Iranian theatre was at a crossroads. Some believed it could grow into something different, what exactly, we didn't know; we would find out in practice. All we knew was that what we had then was very limited. It wasn't what it could be. This view was supported by Khojasteh Kia, Reza Ghotbi, Fereydoun Rahnema, Bijan Saffari, and others.

**So, in your view there was a standard blueprint in theatre that inhibited change?**

Yes, mainstream theatre in those days was purely derivative. It catered to specific audiences with specific types of productions and specific acting styles — like commercial theatre; even the plays fit a specific outlook. Another trendy platform was known as "intellectual theatre".

**It was an imitation of Western theatre.**

That class of theatre resembled dubbed movies;[17] the productions lacked originality and new perspectives. A different trend evolved after Shahin Sarkissian. Then the emerging Iranian theatre

[17] *The Teahouse of the August Moon,* which was an exact copy of the 1950s Broadway show in New York is one example. Theatre directors imitated or copied foreign productions, which produced the same effect as dubbed movies.

produced its own conventions. The outcome was a range of plays by Ali Nassirian, Gholamhossein Sa'edi, Kouros Salahshour, and Bahram Beyzaie, which in effect shared a common notion of theatre — a form of socialist realism disguised as a progressive contemporary vision.

**What was Sarkissian's educational background?**

Sarkissian didn't have any formal training in theatre. He was the director and publisher of La Semaine, a French language literary and artistic weekly in the mid 1950's in Iran. He was friends with Sadeq Hedayat and part of a group well-versed in Western culture that was also attached to the East. The Eastern culture to which they belonged was gravitating toward modernity. Hedayat adopted Western modernist short story writing, a literary genre then unfamiliar in Iran, which on entering the country, was transfigured.

The blueprints for Abdulhossein Nooshin's[18] productions were also entirely Western. Nooshin is remembered mostly for his political activities and for only a handful of productions such as *Volpone*, *The Blue Bird, . . .* and *Topaz,* which he staged under the title, *The Public*; they all belonged to the class of dubbed theatre I mentioned earlier.

Nooshin's chief contribution to Iranian theatre was to make it efficient and respectful; Iranians finally appreciated theatre as a serious undertaking with certain prerequisites. That was his most valuable and important achievement in theatre in Iran. Sarkissian was truly in love with theatre. He knew Nooshin but had his own personal and distinct interests. Young people used to gather around him to hear him talk about theatre. These gatherings gradually led to some people wishfully thinking they could act, create, and direct all by themselves. Sarkissian never had any claims to directing; he only supervised — a supervisor whose personality and presence was creative,[19] like Bijan Saffari at TW.

**Evidently, Sarkissian's work reflected a special kind of education; for example, living in France before WWII in his youth he went to the theatre and was influenced by certain characteristics of the French new school.**

Influence is like food, if digested, it gives one energy and a lifeline, but if it's not absorbed, it leaves the body undernourished. People who aspire to be like someone else without absorbing their thinking merely copy what is superficial. They do not possess an inner identity and their derivative work lacks a life force and creativity. I think people like Sarkissian, Khojasteh Kia, Fereydoun Rahnema, and Bijan Saffari never had that problem when it came to identity or creativity; they didn't want to be like somebody else.

**Could you elaborate a little?**

If Sarkissian found two people chatting in a teahouse, he wondered what kind of poetry could be

[18] Abdulhossein Nooshin (1905-1971), director, actor, and researcher. After graduating from Toulouse Conservatory in France, he staged several Persian and European plays in Iran, the latter in his own translations. Incarcerated as an active member of the Tudeh Party, he escaped and fled to USSR where he settled. His books include *Honar-e Teatr*/The Art of Theatre and a critical edition of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, published in Moscow.

[19] See "Shahin Sarkissian (1910-1966) per notes, writings, letters, and conversations about him with Arby Ovanessian," in *Fasl-e Teatr,* no. 6, summer 1998 (*Köln*); reprinted in *Shahin Sarkissian, Pedar-e Teatr-e Novin-e Iran*/Father of Modern Theatre in Iran, Jamshid Layegh, et al., eds. Hadaf-e Salehin, Tehran 2006.

wrought out of the scene. In his work he followed a path where he sought to discover people's inner worlds, see how the inward might reflect in their outward behavior, and how it could resonate and radiate onstage. The other kind of theatre that I pointed to was preoccupied with appearances and conventions. Those were two different products.

At Sarkissian's gatherings, some actors sensed the difference between these two paths early on. But once they put their discussions into practice onstage, they split in two. Some — mostly young people who had no preconceived notions about theatre — stayed with him. Others — those who had preconceived notions about theatre and were not looking for a different, unknown path — withdrew. The latter group belonged to a generation that had attended acting school; they were students of actors from the previous generation. They did not want to be like their teachers, but neither had they broken free from their personal chains.

There are two types of education. In one, the teacher provides an example and expects you to copy it. In the other, the teacher acts only as your guide and allows the source of creativity to be revealed to you. These two types of education give birth to two distinct types of theatre.

**How did the production of *The Blue Outlet*/Rozaneh-ye Abi come about?**

Sarkissian passed away before his rehearsals were complete. I merely supervised the actors. The production remained on the same plane that he had reached. Only the set design was mine. The play was staged in his honor.

If Sarkissian had lived, he would have been part of TW for sure.

**Why did you choose to undertake set design in the Armen Group?**

I collaborated with the Armen Group because I wanted to learn how to work with actors; I didn't want to be an actor and had told the group I would paint the sets. I believed the experience would be useful to me in the future. In reality, my plan was to study film. During their rehearsals, I would sit down and sketch. One day Sarkissian asked me to make a model from my sketches. I was eighteen. I stayed up all night and constructed the model in all its details. From then on, set and costume design for his productions was my responsibility. That is how in theatre circles I became known as a set designer, though set design was not my main goal in theatre.

**When did you first think about directing professionally?**

After completing my film studies in London, I returned to Iran to make a film. Instead, I became more active in theatre when I staged *Research*/Pazhuheshi following the shocking theft by my cameraman of my screenplay of *Mrs. Ahou's Husband*/Shohar-e Ahou Khanum. After that shock, it took a year and a half before I was able to make a feature film, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, with NITV's support.

**What locations did you choose for filming *The Spring*/Cheshmeh?**

The locations used in the film were in different cities. Even the garden gate's interior and exterior were shot in separate locations. When the gate opens, the garden itself is somewhere else, and so on. The disparate locations were edited in such a way as to appear connected.

None of the locations are complete structures as they appear in the film, except for the burial

ground — which is the old Julfa-Isfahan cemetery — and the reception room in The Master's home, which was shot inside Bagh-e Ferdows in Tehran. That's a historic landmark that caught the attention of NITV management owing to *The Spring*/Cheshmeh[20] and was consequently restored under the supervision of Bijan Saffari. Grotowski's staging of *The Constant Prince*[21] and Peter Brook's rehearsals with ICTR actors took place there as well.

[20] The first feature film shot at Bagh-e Ferdows.

[21] *The Constant Prince* had a two-week run at Bagh-e Ferdows after the Shiraz Arts Festival.

# Prologue
# II

# Biographic Profile of the Artist in Iran

Arby Ovanessian was born on 20 February 1942 in New Julfa, Isfahan. The family — whose records date back to the time of the Safavid Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) — soon moved to Tehran where he grew up learning Armenian, Persian, and English. Childhood experiences that had a direct bearing on his later career in theatre and cinema are excerpted below, followed by highlights of his productions before he left Iran in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and subsequent creative work up to 2018.

**Formatting key**

| | |
|---|---|
| **bold** | Key biographic event |
| ". . . . . " | Ovanessian quotation |
| ▪ | Ovanessian play/film (design, direction, or as detailed) |
| ○ | Re-run of a production (or other activity as noted) |

## 1945-1949

**Attends Armenian kindergarten in Tehran.**

"One day, they screened Charlie Chaplin's short films at school. Everyone kept laughing. For me, what I saw on the screen looked very serious. I couldn't understand why they were laughing!

My first encounter with the stage and the theatre was at the kindergarten's end-of-year festivities. I was cast as a rabbit and didn't like my tail. Someone hurriedly stood me up at the base of a cardboard tree and the curtains flew open. Instantly, I turned my back to the hall. The teacher whispered to me from behind the tree, "Turn around! It's your face the audience wants to see." "Then, they should come over and look from this side," I said. I've always believed that was the moment I became a director!

On watching Walt Disney's *The Three Caballeros* (1944) — which uses both animation and live action — I was captivated by the film projector, and once I saw Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), I became further drawn to the cinema.

The magic of theatre was also revealed to me once I saw a few productions. In *A Musical Play*, Shah Abbas roamed the bazaar anonymously dressed in rags. One wall was lined up with shoes. The actors would lift them, put them on, and place them back; but the shoes wouldn't fall off. In my child's mind, I couldn't figure out why. At home, I tried to hang my shoes on the wall but couldn't; they'd fall off. Finally, someone explained that the wall on the stage was studded with tiny nails to hold the shoes, the nails being invisible at a distance. 'A stage has secrets and tricks,' I thought to myself, and started looking for tiny nails."

1949-1955

**Attends elementary school (bilingual Persian/Armenian).**

"My parents gifted me a small projector with a manual handle when I started school. It could screen a 35 mm film for one minute. By turning the handle backwards, I could play the action in reverse.

I was twelve when I decided to study film. Film studies were not considered a respectable field then and were scarce. In Europe, there was only one English-language film school. I thought of going to London after I finished high school."

1955-1961

**Attends high school with a concentration in mathematics (Persian/Armenian/English).**

"My search brought me to puppet theatre. I would build a stage and create puppet plays. My former kindergarten principal asked the principal of my high school if I could miss school one Sunday a month to perform puppet plays at the kindergarten. This was in fact my first official engagement in theatre."

1956

**Becomes acquainted with Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tair*/Conference of the Birds.**

"The journey of the birds fascinated me. I decided after my film studies I'd make an animated movie of the story."

1957

**Reads Rouben Mamoulian's "Bernhardt Versus Duse: The Arts of Gods and Monkeys" (*Theatre Arts*, Sep. 1957) on the acting techniques of Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt.**

"This article made me aware of two modes of expression in theatre. A few years later, on learning that Mamoulian had studied with Vakhtangov,[1] I gained a better understanding of the concept of inspiration and its contrast with imitation."

1959

**Watches Levon Shant's *The Chained One*/Shghtaivatz-e performed by the Kaspar Ipeckian group from Beirut at the Ararat Club (AC) in Tehran.**

"Although not a particularly good production, the play captivated me. Some people, especially my literature teacher, considered this to be Shant's weakest work. I disagreed. I borrowed a library copy and read it.[2] The play's quality and significance stood out when evaluated independently of the performance that I had seen."

[1] Evgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922), celebrated Armenian-Russian theatre director, actor, and teacher at the Moscow Art Theatre who originated a new concept in theatre known as Fantastic Realism.

[2] For translations of *The Chained One* from Armenian into English, Persian, and French, see fn. 33.

1960

**Becomes acquainted with *shibui* and the application of its seven principles to the aesthetics of objects and artistic expression.**

"In the last year of high school, several of my classmates were active in the Youth Theatre Group at AC. They decided to create a new group and perform for adults. Shahin Sarkissian who headed the National Theatre Group and staged plays in Persian was invited to collaborate with Armenian-speaking youth at the Club. I remember that day well; it was 4 Dec. 1960. We assembled in the library. Sarkissian agreed to work with us and the Armen Group was formed the same day."

1961-63

**Studies at the Faculty of Literature and the Humanities, Tehran University, Department of Foreign Languages.**

1962

**Designs sets and costumes for Shahin Sarkissian's productions at AC:**

- *Light-O'-Love,* Arthur Schnitzler
- *S.S. Tenacity,* Charles Vildrac
- *Armenouhi,* Alexander Shirvanzade
- *Knife,* Raphael Padkhanian
- *Maziar,* Sadeq Hedayat (performed in Persian by the Zoroastrian Association members)
- *The Failures,* Henri-René Lenormand
- *Hunting in the Mountain,* Vahan Mirakian
- *Ile,* Eugene O'Neill

> *When I returned to Tehran as a Fulbright lecturer in '62, I was delighted to see a performance at the Armenian theatre of O'Neill's Ile, with excellent design by Arbe* [sic] *Ovanessian.*[3] -George H. Quinby

"Quinby gave me a copy of Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*. Several passages in this book later motivated and inspired me to work in theatre, among them:

> *Theatre's object is to express objectively certain secret truths, to bring into light of day by means of active gestures certain aspects of truth that have been buried under forms in their encounters with Becoming. The identification of theatre's purpose with every possibility of formal and extended manifestation gives rise to the idea of certain poetry in space which itself is taken for sorcery . . ."*

[3] "O'Neill in Iran." *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter*, vol. II, no. 2, Sep. 1978: www.eoneill.com/library/newsletter/i_2/i-2f.htm. Quinby was an O'Neill expert and lecturer in American Drama at Tehran University. See his "Theatre in Iran" in *A History of the Theatre*, George Freedley and John A. Reeves, eds. Crown, 1968.

1963

**Creates additional designs for Shahin Sarkissian's productions:**

- *The Lady of the Dawn*, Alejandro Casona
- *Uncle Vanya,* Anton Chekhov
- *The Stronger,* August Strindberg
- *Before Breakfast,* Eugene O'Neill
- *Swan Song,* Anton Chekhov

"Shahin Sarkissian's aesthetics and the quality of his work was entirely different from other directors'. Likewise, his choice of plays. These attributes left a deep impression on me, especially the harmonious, passionate, and friendly work environment.

He is the one who gave me a copy of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. I read it with enthusiasm, but I didn't get it; it didn't strike a chord. It's only after he started rehearsing *Uncle Vanya* that the delicacy and depth of Chekhov became evident to me. I became aware of the significance of silence in art and understood the difference between literature and drama."

**Is invited by Professor Quinby to design set and costumes for his production at the newly built Iran America Society (IAS)**[4]

- *Long Day's Journey into Night,* Eugene O'Neill. George Quinby, director; set and costume design: Arby Ovanessian. Opening program in Persian and English

"I signed my first professional contract for this work. A selection of my set designs was exhibited simultaneously in the IAS lobby.

> *For Long Day's Journey, which we hoped to troupe outside of Tehran, Arbe* [sic] *Ovanessian designed a splendid setting which could be folded for touring.*[5] -George H. Quinby

**Designs sets and costumes for additional productions:**

- *The Taming of the Shrew,* William Shakespeare. George Quinby, director; set design: Arby Ovanessian. British Embassy summer compound (in English)
- Four set designs for the Mme. Yelena Ballet School. *Talar-e Farhang*/ Hall of Culture
- Set design for Loris Tjeknavorian's opera, *Rostam o Sohrab* (not staged)

[4] Established in 1925 (Mohammad Ali Foroughi, founding director), the new IAS facility on Vozara Ave. in northern Tehran was inaugurated in 1963 and grew to be a cornerstone of especial significance for theatre and cinema in Iran. IAS was dissolved at the outset of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the complex was turned over to the Inst. for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (*Kanoon*), a legacy of the 1960s-70s that continues to operate nationally today.

[5] Op. cit., "O'Neill in Iran".

**Travels to London to study cinema. Completes three specialized courses at the London School of Film Technique:**

Fiction: 1963-64

Animation: 1964-65

Documentary: 1965-66

"I watched several films at the school and at BFI every day and went to the theatre in the evenings. My focus was entirely on cinema. It never occurred to me that I might work in theatre in the future as well. My main preoccupation was to find a language and mode of expression of my own.

On seeing David W. Griffith's silent film, *Corner in Wheat* (1906) and Yasujiro Ozu's *Banshun*/Late Spring (1949) that was screened along with five of his talkies for the first time in the West, I realized that the essence of cinematic expression does not rest on whether the camera is static or moving, or on the dialogue. From both an artistic and a technical point of view, cinema functions like a time capsule that has the capacity to record and preserve events and to be revisited later. Some films lose their impact quickly and others endure for a long time. Most films are products of popular trends; only a few are faithful to the essence and nature of the medium. Those are the ones that have endured as film classics."

**Participates in a workshop on set design at the British Drama League under the direction of Sean Kenny.**

**Sends set and costume designs to Tehran for Shahin Sarkissian.**

- *For the Sake of Honor,* Alexander Shirvanzade (not staged)

**Interns at Shepperton Studios with Anthony Asquith during the filming of *The Yellow Rolls Royce* (film school program).**

**Yasujiro Ozu dies 12 Dec 1963.**

"In collaboration with other students, we devoted the film school's monthly publication to reviewing Ozu's work.

A short time later, Peter Brook began experimental work at LAMDA centered on Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*; he had also staged *King Lear.* Both caught my attention. The feelings I had first experienced in childhood and later during Shahin Sarkissian's rehearsals were reawakened in me. I realized that supernatural and magical events and elements only occur in theatre. Theatre was revealing its magical power to me. What was the source of that magic? How were these magical spaces created? These questions became the core of my search.

Artaud had said this about theatrical language: "It is not a matter of suppressing speech in theatre but of changing its role . . ."

In those days, theatre everywhere was gradually moving toward this same notion. That was the first time I saw a Greek tragedy performed; it was *The Bacchae* by Euripides. Though it was not a good production, the goal, the power, and the significance of ancient Greek theatre became clear to me. I realized that the essence of theatre, as a medium, is not literary but visceral."

**Participates in the Stage Lighting Workshop at the Strand Electric Engineering Co., under the direction of Richard Pilbrow.**

1964

**Makes his first film at the London School of Film Technique.**

- *The Mask.* Duration 6 mins., b/w, 35 mm, based on a short story by Grigor Zohrab; dialogue: William Dumaresq

"In the 1960s, London enjoyed a rich cultural life and was the center of new movements. Alongside film school, British theatre became a parallel school for me. That is where I became acquainted with rich dramatic literature. I saw a considerable number of notable productions from around the world.

I had a great and incredible piece of luck. It was the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birthday. Prominent theatre companies were invited to London for the World Theatre Season. They included the Moscow Art Theatre with productions by Stanislavski, Comédie française (Paris), Abbey Theatre (Dublin), Polish Contemporary Theatre (Warsaw), Schiller Theatre (West Berlin), Neapolitan Theatre of Peppino De Filippo (Italy), Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio (New York), Karolos Kouns' remarkable Greek Art Theatre (Athens), Habima Theatre with its legendary "Dybbuk" directed by Vaghtangov, Brecht's unique Berliner Ensemble (East Berlin), and so forth. I saw all those productions.

Over three years, I saw countless plays and films. I wrote about some of them and submitted them to the Armenian daily *Alik* in Tehran. Several were published under the title, "Letters from London"; others were lost in the mail.

The most important artistic discovery for me was the collaboration between Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg where Artaud's 'poetry in space,' the principles of *shibui* aesthetics, and Eastern and Western philosophy co-existed side-by-side. In all the plays I saw during that period what left a lasting impression on me was the few nights I lived in that space and experienced the presence of silence in theatre."

**Interns in the Halas and Batchelor, Bob Godfrey, and Richard Williams film animation studios.**

"The London School of Film Technique did not have an animation department and therefore arranged a special internship program for me."

**Ships set and costume designs to Tehran for Shahin Sarkissian:**

- *Miss Julie,* August Strindberg (not staged; used for AO production 1967)
- *Mohallel*/The Fixer, Sadeq Hedayat (not staged)
- *Mordehkhorha*/The Scavengers, Sadeq Hedayat (not staged)
- *Changal*/Claws, Sadeq Hedayat (not staged)
- *Rozaneh-ye Abi*/*The Blue Outlet,* Akbar Radi (staged in 1966 after Sarkissian's death)

- *Oful*/The Fall, Akbar Radi (not staged)
- *Waiting for Godot,* Samuel Beckett (not staged)

**Interns at Shepperton Studios with John Schlesinger during the filming of *Darling* (film school program).**

**Interns at Pinewood Studios with François Truffaut during the filming of *Farenheit 451* (film school program).**

**Starts writing a screenplay based on *Mrs. Ahou's Husband*/Shohar-e Ahou Khanum,[6] a novel by Ali Mohammad Afghani.**

1965

**Visits the first European retrospective of Arshile Gorky at the Tate Gallery in London and learns about his universe.**

**Designs and paints a backdrop of London rooftops for *Assassination*, a school film, and receives a special credit for it.**

**Makes an animated film:**

- *Parvana.* Duration 8 mins., color, 35 mm, based on a poem by Hovhanes Tumanian; music: Komitas Quartet

"This was both the first animated and the first color film made at the London School of Film Technique; it was filmed at the Richard Williams Studio. In it, I alluded to the 'Seven Valleys' of *Mantiq ut-Tair* by using seven colors and the symbolism of fire and butterflies."

**Attends the Joseph von Sternberg Workshop and watches his unfinished film, *I, Claudius,* which was the class topic (film school program).**

**Serves as artistic director in the film school documentary program.**

- *The Dancer.* George Guera, cinematographer and director. Duration 54 mins., b/w, 16 mm. The Royal Ballet School, Baron's Court, Kensington
- *Away from Home.* Kevin Quinn, director. Duration 12 mins., b/w, 16 mm

**Is officially appointed to represent the London School of Film Technique at the International Conference of Film Schools.**

"By accident, I learned about Jerzy Grotowski's work at the *Theatre of 13 Rows* in Poland that same year. At the time, few people outside the borders of Poland knew him. It was because the film school sent me to the conference as its representative that the conditions were created for me to get to know his work.

It was through Grotowski that I learned of Carl Jung's writings, which I then read and duly applied. I found much similarity between his work and Iranian mysticism."

[6] Lit., 'Mrs. Gazelle's Husband'.

1966

***Parvana* is screened at the Oberhausen International Short Film Festival.**

"When I graduated, I had accumulated a lot of information and experience in both film and theatre. But that didn't feel enough. Like a pilgrim, I traveled across Europe for a whole month to theatres in Paris, Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome, and Athens. I realized then that my passion for film and the theatre arts was boundless."

**Returns to Iran.**

"I arrived in Tehran at midnight. A few days later, as arranged by Ahmad Baratloo, an associate of Shahin Sarkissian, we took my screenplay of *Mrs. Ahou's Husband* to Ali Mohammad Afghani, and received his approval.

Around that time, Sarkissian, who was working on *The Blue Outlet* with Persian actors, proposed that I work with the Armen Group. I chose Hagop Baronian's *The Respectable Beggars.* I wanted to adapt his novel for the stage — a thought that had preoccupied me for a long while — and had just started rehearsals when Mr. Shahin, as we used to call him, passed away unexpectedly. The Persian actors-requested that I supervise the final rehearsals of *The Blue Outlet.* The production opened at IAS. Every night as the curtains were drawn, I'd light a candle in Mr. Shahin's memory and place it downstage to burn through the end of the performance."

- *Mrs. Ahou's Husband*. Screenwriter and director. Begins shooting the picnic sequence (Sep.)
- *The Breath of God,* Hakop Oshakan. Design and direction. World premiere, AC (Dec.)

1967

***Parvana* is presented at Cinestud - International Student Film Festival, Amsterdam, and receives an award.**

**Faces obstacles in the production of *Mrs. Ahou's Husband*.**

"My first shocking experience in filmmaking."

**Starts collaboration with the Minassian Brothers' (Soleiman and Herand) Chaplin Film and teaches animation to their personnel.**

**Makes films:**

- *Lebbæus Who Was Named Thaddæus* (Lebbæus/Thaddæus) (documentary). Duration 33 mins., b/w, 35 mm (in Armenian)
- Three commercials (animation) for various products

**Serves on the jury at the Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition by invitation of Khojasteh Kia.**

**Continues design and direction in theatre.**

"I began working with Sarkissian's Persian-speaking actors as well — at their request. This was my first independent work in Persian."

- *Miss Julie,* August Strindberg. Design and direction, IAS
- *Striptease,* Slawomir Mrożek. Translation and rehearsals, IAS (not staged)

1968

- *The Respectable Beggars,* Hakop Baronian. Design and direction, IAS

"This was a light-hearted, cheerful production that made us all — actors, audience, and me — laugh seriously at hypocrisy."

I noticed that when a play is performed in the original language, the actors easily relate to the source of actions and display more direct, appropriate movements and expressions."

**Writes *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, a screenplay based on Mkrtich Armen's novel, *The Spring of Heghnar*.**

**Distribution of *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus* is banned following objections by the executive committee of the Association of Armenian University Graduates of Tehran.**

"This was my second shock in filmmaking in Iran."

- *A Modern, Profound and Imporant Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era,*[7] (Pazhuheshi Novin 0 Zharf o Setorg dar Sang-vareha-ye Dowre-ye Bistopanjom-e Zaminshenasi) (*Research*/Pazhuheshi) by Abbas Nalbandian. Design, direction, and lighting by Arby Ovanessian. World premiere, Open-Air Theatre, Hafeziyeh Stadium, Second Shiraz Arts Festival (Sep. 5)[8]
    - *Research*/Pazhuheshi, IAS, Tehran (Dec. 15-30)

***Research*/Pazhuheshi wins NITV Prize for Design and Direction and becomes the first Iranian production to be recognized in the annals of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) as a world premiere.**

"Discovering and staging this play is my most important work in Iranian theatre."

**The Financial Times publishes a review of the Shiraz production:**

> *I found I could sit out the long show without reluctance, since it was exceptionally well performed by actors with sure command of voice and gesture and movement, by a producer who could communicate, as a choreographer might, through stage groups, through control of timing and tension.* [9]
>
> -Andrew Porter

[7] This is the English title in the festival brochure. The complete title in Nalbandian's original handwritten ms. includes a starred footnote and translates into: "*A Novel and Profound and Colossal Research into the Fossils of the 25th* Geological Era (*or the 14th, or the 20th, makes no difference)*". In the Persian published edition of the play, the word order was changed to profound-co-lossal-novel: "*Pazhuheshi Zharf o Setorg o No . . .*," and is the official title in Persian.

[8] See Farrokh Gaffary, *ITI Créations mondiales / World Premieres,* no. 67-68, Paris 1970: 112-113.

[9] "Plays and Dances." *Financial Times,* 9 Oct. 1968.

"The production happened by accident. Some jury members of the 1967 Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition had been impressed by Nalbandian's language but believed the text to be untheatrical and unstageable. I disagreed. To prove them wrong, I proposed to work on it for two weeks. Fereydoun Rahnema immediately handed the text over to me. Nobody objected. We rehearsed. When the jury came and watched, they selected the production for the 1968 Shiraz Arts Festival. The rest of the story is well known. It made a lot of noise. I won a prize as well. And that is how my work became known outside of Iran's borders. Against my own wishes, I became known as a theatre director."

**Reza Ghotbi approves a proposal to create the Theatre Workshop/*Kargah-e Nemayesh* (TW).**

"By the time I staged my third play, I had found a specific rehearsal and production technique that was the outcome of, and a response to my personal aspirations in theatre and to my aesthetic sense. I thought of it as 'theatrical logic' and set to developing it further."

**NITV participates in financing Ovanessian's feature film, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh.**

**Co-writes the TW bylaws with Khojasteh Kia and Fereydoun Rahnema.**

**Begins teaching history of film and theatre at the NITV School of Film and Television, Tehran.**

1969

- *On the Way,* Levon Shant. Design and direction. IAS (in Armenian)

**Gives lectures on American experimental cinema and screens films, IAS**

**TW is founded.**

**Begins collaboration with Bijan Saffari at TW.**

- *Hunger and Thirst,* Eugene Ionesco (rehearsals only)
  - *Oedipus, Oedipus,* based on Sophocles. Shahru Kheradmand and Iraj Anvar, co-directors; set design: Bijan Saffari; costume design: Arby Ovanessian. The first production staged at TW
- *Hedda Gabler,* Henrik Ibsen. Design and direction for the English language International Theatre of Tehran, IAS

"I staged plays in Persian, Armenian, and English over a short period of time."

**Begins filming *The Spring*/Cheshmeh.**

**Jerzy Grotowski travels to Iran for the first time and has conversations with TW members.**

1970

**Is invited to perform *Research*/Pazhuheshi at the Royan Festival in France, and to screen *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus*.**

> *Ovanessian's staging, spartan in the extreme but relentlessly rigorous, accords this simple but very profound notion a surprising power and vitality. Ovanessian's goal is to establish a directly emotional kind of communication with the audience using pure theatrical logic, a goal that is here clearly accomplished. Isn't this proof that theatre, beyond the barriers of languages and civilizations, is a language that can reach everyone's heart when it is the product of creators like Nalbandian and Ovanessian? By contrast with other dispensable presentations at Royan, its exigency will shine with even more splendor.*[10]
>
> -Jean-Louis Farenc

"Peter Brook had heard about the play from critics. He asked if we could meet in Paris."

**Meets with Peter Brook, Reza Ghotbi, and Bijan Saffari at Maison de l'Iran in Paris; Brook is invited to visit Iran and learn about the state of theatre in the country.**

***Research*/Pazhuhesi is performed at Downstage, IAS Set Construction Workshop, before Brook and London's Royal Court Theatre Artistic Director Anthony Page:**

> *Without understanding the language, I found this one of those rare experiences in theatre where you stumble across something totally strange and stimulating and are grateful that the accident happened. I also felt that with this acting, writing, and directing talent among the young of Persia, there was the beginning of a truly original and vital theatre.*[11]
> -Anthony Page

"When, after seeing *Research*/Pazhuheshi, Brook invited me to collaborate with ICTR when it was about to be established in Paris, I talked to him about Levon Shant's "The Chained One". The text was not yet available in translation; he asked me for the original Armenian and had it translated into English through the Gulbenkian Foundation.[12] He read it and added it to the Centre's projects."

**Peter Brook and Anthony Page meet with members of TW on site.**

**Travels to Khorasan (Mashhad and Neishapur) with Brook, Page, Mohammad Baqer Ghaffari, Hossein Ziai, and Mahasti Afshar to see a *ta'ziyeh*, and visits the tomb of Attar.**

"On the trip, I talked to Brook about *Mantiq ut-Tair*, and when we were close to the tomb of Attar, I described its potential for theatre.

At the end of the trip, Anthony Page gave me his copy of *The Master and Margarita* that he had been reading and invited me to present *Research*/Pazhuheshi at the Royal Court Theatre."

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[10] "Le Théâtre au Festival de Royan." *Combat*, 1 Apr. 1970.

[11] Observations on the 1968 Tehran performance reproduced in the 1970 Royal Court Theatre program notes.

[12] *The Chained One,* English tr. by Mischa Kudian for ICTR (unpublished 1970); Persian by Arby Ovanessian (unpublished 1975); French, *L'Enchainé,* Anaid Donabedian and Alice Artignan, preface and translation. L'Espace d'un instant, 2003.

**TW hosts Festival of Independent Movies (8 mm).**

- *Vīs o Ramin* by Mahin Jahanbegloo (Tajadod).[13] Design and direction. World premiere, opening program of "Theatre and Ritual," Fourth Shiraz Arts Festival, timed with the setting sun (Aug. 27)

"For the first time, a play was performed in Persepolis at sunset; a fire was lighted again, and theatre and ritual became a subject of conversation."

> *. . . He [Ovanessian] did achieve some haunting effects, like the first appearance of the doomed Queen on the stairway as if she were stirring to life out of stone, and her final panic-stricken flight into darkness across the Apadana of Xerxes.*[14]
>
> -Irving Wardle

**Starts teaching at the NITV School of Film and Television (film analysis, history of cinema, history of theatre, and film animation techniques).**

**Is invited to perform *Research*/Pazhuheshi at the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF), Yugoslavia.**

***Research*/Pazhuheshi is performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London.**

> *Arby Ovanessian is an international director in the sense that his beautiful work makes sense, whatever one's nationality . . . There is a lot of theatre research in the air; the Persian RESEARCH . . . is a fascinating achievement . . . For every child, Persia means something subtle and poetic, and in fact this is just what this performance contains.*[15]
>
> -Peter Brook

> *In fact, the members of this company do possess an extraordinary talent for movement, gesture and expression that enables them, at least for the most part, to breach the language barrier.*[16] -Keith Nurse

**Translates, designs and directs five plays by Samuel Beckett at TW:**

- *Act Without Words I*
- *Act Without Words II*
- *Play*
- *Come and Go*
- *Breath*

**Finishes editing *The Spring*/Cheshmeh.**

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[13] Henceforth, Mahin Tajadod.

[14] "Rituals in the Desert: The Shiraz Festival." *Gambit*, nos. 18 and 19, 1971: 144-159.

[15] Excerpt from Brook's letter to the Royal Court Theatre, reproduced in the *Research*/Pazhuheshi program notes.

[16] "Persians Act an Enigmatic Drama." *Daily Telegraph,* 12 Oct. 1970.

**Travels to Paris to collaborate with ICTR.**

**Meets writers Peter Handke and Ted Hughes; directors Joseph Chaikin, Geoffrey Reeves, and Andrei Serban; and fifteen actors from eight countries — Cameroon, France, Japan, Mali, Portugal, Spain, U.K., and U.S.A.**

**Explores the theory and practice of theatre in diverse languages and writings:**

- Rehearses 'The Life Demon' and 'Rites' from Levon Shant's *The Chained One,* ICTR (in Armenian).
- Develops and stages a play in collaboration with Andrei Serban using only sound and movement, with François Marthouret, Joao Mota, and Parviz Pourhosseini.
- Develops and stages a children's play, *The Triumphant Cock,* with Paloma Matta (in French) and helps create the chant of the cock's crow.

1971

**Returns to Iran with Peter Brook to select Iranian actors and work with them on an ICTR collaborative project to explore new frontiers in theatre.**

"On the flight to Iran, we discussed our research. I talked about *Vīs o Ramin,* which was in rehearsal, and Mahin Tajadod's work on Avestan phonetics. Brook asked me to call and invite her to participate in ICTR's project for the Shiraz Arts Festival as soon as we arrived in Tehran.

In the months following the initial meeting, potential Avestan speech sounds were first tested at Bagh-e Ferdows with Iranian actors and developed into a distinctive mode of expression before the arrival of the rest of the group from Paris.

The Iranian actors had been selected at the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Arts and Culture and at IAS/Downstage. The final selection was as follows:

-Three actors from *Research*/Pazhuheshi

-Two actors from TW

-Two actors from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tehran University

"Brook and I worked together and were in total agreement about the selection of these seven actors.

I had not offered an opinion in the process of selecting the additional eight actors — seven more from the Ministry plus one from a television drama series.

The actors, most of whom were unfamiliar with my work, practiced at Bagh-e Ferdows for a month and a half in accord with a completely new technique."

**Travels with Brook to the Persian Gulf (Bandar Abbas and Hormoz) to watch a *Zār* [exorcism] ceremony and to plan rehearsals with the actors before Brook's return to France.**

**Brook returns to Iran accompanied by fifteen international actors (June 10).**

"Two groups — 29 individuals in all — set to work exchanging modes of acting and expression and improvising at Bagh-e Ferdows, and occasionally in villages outside Tehran and later, in Shiraz. Texts in different and unfamiliar languages (Avestan, ancient Greek, Latin, old Spanish, and so forth) were used in the exercises; Brook, Reeves, Serban, and I who led the exercises, and Ted Hughes (poet), reviewed and assessed the outcomes daily.

It is during this process that using syllabic phonemes, Ted Hughes transformed 'The Life Demon' monologue from Shant's *The Chained One* into the Krogon monologue. Soon, this innovation came to be called *Orghast*, a designation that was then applied to the work as a whole, a composite of languages and sources.

As this process evolved, four Iranian actors quit."

- *Orghast,* "a work in progress," text by Ted Hughes,[17] directed by Peter Brook
  in collaboration with Arby Ovanessian, Geoffrey Reeves, Andrei Serban. World premiere, Fifth Shiraz Arts Festival:

  *Orghast* I, Tomb of Artaxeres II, Persepolis (Aug. 28 - Sep. 4)

  *Orghast* II, Naqsh-e Rostam (Sep. 5) [18]

  "The performance included ten Iranian and fifteen international actors."

**Is invited to stay involved with ICTR, participate in presenting the Center's research at the Théâtre des Nations, and travel with the Paris group to Africa.**

"I declined the invitation for two reasons. I wanted to finish *The Spring*/Cheshmeh soundtrack, which was incomplete owing to the amount of research and rehearsals needed for *Orghast,* and also to continue my work at TW. I realized that my work in Iran had priority and that collaboration with ICTR on its trip to Africa did not satisfy my cultural and professional aspirations."

**City Players Group/*Gorouh-e Bazigaran-e Shahr* (CPG) is formed at TW.**

"Following the performance of *Orghast*, seven of the Iranian actors talked to Brook privately and expressed their interest in continuing the new direction and research in theatre. Brook encouraged them to work with me. To ensure a dynamic working environment, I invited seven other actors to TW who had never done experimental work before. The group was named City Players Group after their future home, City Theatre/*Teatr-e Shahr* (CT), which was soon to be inaugurated. When Bijan Mofid was invited to join as a collaborative director, and after three more actors joined, the permanent members numbered seventeen. For physical training, I enlisted Gita Os-

[17] The text included fragments from Aeschylus, Seneca, Calderon, Shant, and Mahin Tajadod's research on the Avesta.

[18] For more information on *Orghast* see Negin Djavaherian, *Not Nothingness*: *Peter Brook's 'Empty Space' and Its Architecture*. Ph.D. Dissertation, McGill University, 2010: 94-187, and A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*: *An International Experiment in Theatre.* Eyre Methuen, 1972.

tovani, a proficient instructor of the Martha Graham technique, and began training the actors according to a rigorous program."

**Starts sound recording *The Spring*/Cheshmeh.**

**CPG's inaugural works are presented at TW.**

- *Self-Accusation,* Peter Handke. Design and direction.
- *My Foot My Tutor,* Peter Handke. Design and direction.

1972

- *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, free adaptation of Mkrtich Armen's *The Spring of Heghnar*. Screenplay and direction; cinematography: Nemat Haqiqi (his first feature film). Duration 100 mins., b/w, 35 mm. World premiere, First Tehran International Film Festival

  *Arby Ovanessian's "The Spring" received a mixed public reception. Yet it was one of the highlights of the festival. With a stunning visual perfection, it tells a love story at several levels that unfolds within a symbolic context . . . the director demonstrates such talent in using the duration of shots and their visual interplay that the film exudes a supreme beauty, which by and large compensates for the few ambiguities in the narrative.*[19] -Gaston Haustrate

  *. . . a tightly encrypted and highly refined work . . . expressed with a very contemplative rhythm in a very static style together summon an almost magical state.*[20] -Marcel Martin

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh is subsequently screened at:**

- Sixth Shiraz Arts Festival
- Venice Film Festival
- Semaine de nouveau cinéma iranien, Paris

**Finishes writing *Salaman va Absal*, a screenplay based on the 15th century Persian poet Jami's *Seven Thrones*/Haft Orang.**

"NITV postponed the production following several complaints that echoed Iranian news reports critical of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh. Film producers, mistakenly believing that the state planned to compete with their commercial movies, launched a massive campaign claiming the state had allocated extensive sums to this film and abused public funds.

At the time, I was busy with several projects simultaneously; plus, it was not my habit to respond to criticism; my work itself was the clearest response. These criticisms did not bother me and did not impair my work because I worked in an environment that was not affected by these matters.

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[19] "Téhéran : des "pingouins" et des œuvres." *Cinéma 72,* June 1972: 43.

[20] "Le Cinéma d'ailleurs : Téhéran." *Ecran 72,* June 1972 : 42.

Financial profit and public reception have never been my objective. For me, two genuine spectators suffice and give me enough reason to work."

- *All at Once, A Friend of God, Died in the Love of God, Slain by God, Died by the Sword of God* "Nagahan Haza Habibullah, Mata fi Hubbullah, Qatilullah, Mata Beseifullah" by Abbas Nalbandian (*All at Once*/Nagahan). Design and direction. World premiere, Delgosha Pavilion, Sixth Shiraz Arts Festival, midnight (Sep. 1-7)

  *. . . a highly literary text released into startling visual life by Ovanessian's mise en scène . . . the images of mass guilt he produces in All at Once is one I shall not forget.*[21] - Irving Wardle

- *All at Once*/Nagahan, experimental version, TW
- *The Cherry Orchard,* Anton Chekhov, at Bagh-e Ferdows, and three experimental versions at TW. Stage design and direction; costume design: Fereydoun Ave.

1973

- *Saved,* Edward Bond. Set and costume design for Maryam Khalvati's production, TW
- *Happy Days,* Samuel Beckett. Design and direction, TW
- *Beckett 5.* Translation; published by TW

**City Theatre (CT) opens in Tehran (Jan. 27).**

- *The Cherry Orchard.* Set design and direction

"The Russian ambassador came to the theatre on the second night. We met during intermission. I asked him for a copy of *The Color of Pomegranates,* a film banned in the USSR that I knew had been projected at the Embassy's club in Tehran and which I wanted to be seen at *Kanoon-e Film* (Iranian cinematheque).

*The Color of Pomegranates* was thus screened at the Kanoon in March. The same print was later shown at IAS in April and at the tenth Shiraz Arts Festival (1976); it was then secretly sent abroad and screened at the Cinémathèque suisse (1978) and the London (1979), Montreal (1982), and Washington, DC (1985) Film Festivals.

The screenings of the film, which represents Sergei Parajanov's contribution to the development of film language, led to his release from prison and his return to filmmaking."

- *All at Once*/Nagahan, third mis-en-scène, CT

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh has its first commercial screening in Tehran.**

"Commercial movies producer Mehdi Missaqiyeh insisted on presenting the film at his movie theatre, Capri (now, Bahman). Five days later he cancelled — in breach of contract — claiming protesters were vandalizing the seats and that the film was not gainful."

[21] "Lure of Iranian Drama." *The Times,* 28 Sep. 1972.

- *The Criminals*/Night of the Assassins, José Triana. Set and costume design for Houshang Azadivar, TW

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh is screened at the Nancy International Theatre Festival, France (NITF).**

- *All at Once*/Nāgahan (second new mise en scène), NITF

> *Submerged in low light, the Poincarré Gymnasium rises to a temple's heights, and the presence of the actors, prostrate and motionless, exhorts the spectator, in turn, to silence . . .*
>
> *A mise en scène of extreme restraint, the actors hint rather than mime. The exceptional harmony of the chants [and] the musicality of the language help intensify the effect immensely. An enigmatic but spell-binding production.*[22]
>
> -Le Républican Lorrain

***Self-Accusation* is performed at NITF.**

**Travels to Mazandaran and Gorgan to watch *ta'ziyeh.***

- *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich,* Bertolt Brecht. Set and costume design for Bijan Mofid, TW
- *As We Were,* Arthur Adamov. Design and direction, TW
- *The Creditors,* August Strindberg. Design and direction, TW

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh and *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus* are screened at the Venice Film Festival.**

**Henri Langlois chooses both films to be screened and added to the collection of the Cinémathèque française and includes them in the "Histoire permanente du cinéma" program. The films are subsequently screened at:**

- Armenian Film Festival, Paris 1983-1989
- Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, Pesaro 1986
- Festival des Trois Continents, Nantes 1990
- Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1993
- Los Angeles Film Festival 1993
- British Film Institute, London 1999
- Musée du Cinéma, Brussels 1999
- Festival d'Automne, Paris 2000
- Magic Cinema, Paris 2007

> *This film* [*The Spring*/Cheshmeh] *with exquisite visuals is in fact composed, as in oriental music, on a vertical concept of time . . . This work of an almost unbearably slow pace emits such beauty, and is directed with such exactitude, that Ovanessian is going to arouse passions like Parajanov and Tarkovsky.*[23]
>
> -Claude-Marie Tremois

- *White Nights,* Fyodor Dostoevsky. Set and costume design for Iraj Anvar, TW

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[22] "'Nagahan' par le 'Kargah Nemayesh'." *Le Républicain Lorrain,* 4 May 1973.

[23] "Si les arbres étaient des crayons . . ." *Telerama,* 16 Oct. 1985 : 16.

1974

- *Man, Beast and Virtue,* Luigi Pirandello. Design and direction, CT

**Is invited by Bahram Beyzaie to teach theatre at the College of Fine Arts, Tehran University.**

- *Caligula,* Albert Camus. Design and direction. Premiere, Tachareh, Persepolis, Eighth Shiraz Arts Festival, nightfall, full moon (Aug. 16-18)

*In the heart of Darius' Tachareh Palace, a secret hall with walls smooth as mirror, with porticos and niches, and colossal bas-reliefs of the King of Kings, in this silence, a mysterious enactment opens Albert Camus' drama with breathtaking majesty . . . a symbolism quite foreign to Camus' intellectualism aligned with a picaresque, burlesque style that wouldn't have displeased the playwright and which brings this raucous tragi-comedy to life.*[24] -Jacques Longchamp

*Caligula was an interesting and ambitious attempt to deal with a notoriously difficult play . . . this was a thoughtful and intelligent production.*[25]

-Michael Coveney

*We sat crowded, on cushions below the stage . . . The director accentuates Caligula's duality who here has a second self, building up the measure of his madness. We are drawn in by the astonishing charm of the production and suddenly we witness Caligula setting fire to an umbrella which he holds in his hand. The burnt material reveals a network of wires. By this provocation Caligula has sealed his own fate.*

*On the bas-reliefs of Persepolis, we see Darius as he cuts through a griffin; we see him also under a huge umbrella. That umbrella symbolizes the Heavens, favorably protecting the ruler. Over the Caligula in Persepolis, there is an empty sky. In this way the distinguished Iranian director tied Camus' drama with the great tradition of Persian culture.*[26]

-Stanlislaw Hebanowski

***Caligula* is performed at CT, Tehran.**

- *Little Eyolf,* Henrik Ibsen. Translation (with Mahin Tajadod), set design, and direction; costume design: Fereydoun Ave, TW and CT

**Travels to Yazd to watch *ta'ziyeh* and visit Zoroastrian landmarks.**

[24] "Les Nuits de Chiraz." *Le Monde,* 23 Aug. 1974.

[25] "Iran Festival." *Financial Times,* 5 Sep. 1974: 3.

[26] "W. Szirazie, Zycie." *Literackie,* 1190, 1974: 5.

1975

**CT is closed for repairs and to upgrade the acoustics of the large hall. Proposes transforming the unused underground parking lot into a work-&-performance space to be named Crossroads Theatre/*Chahar-su* (CRT). Architectural consultant and lighting design: Richard Pilbrow, National Theatre/London.**

**Represents Iran at the ITI Conference: 'The State of Theatre around the World' — Théâtre des Nations, Warsaw, Poland.**

**Participates in Grotowski's Paratheatrical Explorations.**

"I've always been interested in the subconscious. This is at the root of my relationship with Grotowski. In dramatic literature as well, I've always looked for ways to establish relationships with the subconscious on both the personal and the group level."

Travels to Tus to watch a *ta'ziyeh*.

- *Rope, Dance and Translations.* Provided the soundtrack for Andy Degroat's choreography by reading Christopher Knowles' poems. Ninth Shiraz Arts Festival
- *For the Sake of the Other,* Levon Shant. Design and direction. World premiere, AC

***Caligula* tours Wroclaw, Poznań, Gliwice, and Warsaw.**

**Trains actors to lead four CPG workshops for beginners.**

- *The Chained One* by Levon Shant. Translation into Persian
- *Letters from Me to My Family and Vice Versa.* Set & costume design for Reza Qassemi, TW
- *Staged improvisations* (8 programs), TW

1976

**Jerzy Grotowski travels to Iran for the fourth time.**

"Grotowski was planning to present *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* for the last time at the tenth Shiraz Arts, to be followed by paratheatrical explorations with students and artists over one and a half months, with me as assistant.

To select a venue, we first went to Shiraz. After some research and on-site tests, he decided to present *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* in the open air over the pool that he had seen at Haft-Tan; he drew a layout and gave it to me. He then chose the ruins of Deir-e Gachin Caravanserai on the desert's edge to conduct paratheatrical experiments.

In Tehran, having held meetings at the National TV and the Shiraz Arts Festival, we drove to the airport at midnight for his flight back to Poland. Moments before boarding, he wrote a brief note and asked me to give it to his Polish associate for the attention of the festival's executives; it stated that he was considering ending his presentations and was withdrawing from both projects."

***Caligula* tours South America.**

- Caracas, Venezuela

"Twenty-four hours before the presentation in South America, we learned by phone that Alireza Mojallal's exit visa had been denied because he had not yet completed his mandatory military service. All other members of the production team were in Caracas. Absent a substitute actor for Cherea's role, I had no choice but to play the part myself."

> *There was general agreement about which plays benefited from exceptional direction and interpretation*: *Albert Camus' Caligula from Iran.*[27]
>
> -Genevieve Rozenthal

- Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

> *The stage adaptation of Camus is astonishing and makes it barely recognizable on the stage. The production is faultless, the hurdle of the Persian language notwithstanding. It was a pleasure to feel hypnotized watching this Persian group carry a very confident mis en scène, with meticulous movements, soft voices, radiant eyes, very attractive actors and actresses, masters of their iconic presence.*[28]
> -Fausto Fuser

> *In adding their own incomparably rich design to the Camusian cosmovision, the Iranians present a very beautiful spectacle whose precision and certitude is born from stage directions rooted deeply in the search for a truth and an authentic expression that steers them toward limitless creativity.*[29]
>
> -Ilka Marinho Zanotto

> *Among the productions, the Iranian staging of Camus' Caligula had such force that, etched in the spectator's memory, it will abide for a long time despite the language barrier. The linguistic problem did not prevent the Iranian group under the direction of Arby Ovanessian from resonating, by its quality, in an unusual theatrical communication.*[30]
>
> -Yan Michalski

**Declines to renew contract with CPG.**

**Withdraws from TW.**

**Curates 'The East as Seen by Filmmakers' program at the tenth Shiraz Arts Festival.**

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[27] "Caracas, Tercer Festival Internacional de Teatro," *Latin American Theatre Review*, fall 1976: 65-71.

[28] "Poesia e Força de "Caligula" Iraniano." *Folha de S. Paulo,* 7 May 1976: 29.

[29] "O Absurdo de Camus Visito por Grupo Persa." *O Estado de S. Paulo,* 12 May 1976: 8.

[30] "O Teatro Mundial en Paulo." *Jornal do Brasil*, 11 May 1976: 1.

- *There Appeared a Knight with a Red Horse, a Red Face, Red Hair, Red Lips, Red Teeth,*
  *a Red Gown, a Red Spear . . .* "Savāri Dar-amad Asbash Sorkh, Ruyash Sorkh, Muyash Sorkh, Labash Sorkh, Dandanash Sorkh, Qabayash Sorkh, Neyzehash Sorkh . . ."
  (*A Knight*/Savāri). Concept, design and direction; text redacted by Mahin Jahanbegloo (Tajadod;[31] music: Fozieh Majd. World premiere, Tomb of Artaxerxes II, Persepolis, Tenth Shiraz Arts Festival (Aug. 22-28)

**Concludes teaching theatre at the College of Fine Arts, Tehran University**

**Serves as design consultant for a new AC theatre to be built near Ararat Stadium, Vanak, Tehran. Architect and construction: Rostam Voskanian; technical adviser: Richard Pilbrow, National Theatre/London.**

> "The theatre did not get built due to the shift in Iranian politics and unfortunately it was forgotten after the [1979] Revolution. Had it been built, I'm certain it would have been the best theatre in Tehran."

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh is screened at the Goethe Institute, Tehran.**

**NIRT's TelFilm offers to produce *Salaman va Absal*. Ovanessian begins preparations and travels to Hormoz, Darab, Kerman, and Haft-Dokhtar for location hunting.**

**Supervises CRT construction process.**

**Translates five plays from English into Persian in collaboration with Sadreddin Zahed:**

- *The Sleeper's Den,* Peter Gill
- *The Two-Character Play,* Tennessee Williams
- *Funny Old Man,* Tadeusz Różewicz
- *Christie in Love,* Howard Brenton
- *The Burgmaster,* Gert Hofmann

1977

**Crossroads Theatre/*Chahar-su* (CRT) opens (Aug. 29)**

- *The Sleeper's Den,* Peter Gill. Design and direction. Inaugural program, CRT

  "The inaugural program was dedicated to the pioneering actress Mrs. Loretta in honor of the 50th anniversary of her career in theatre."
- *The Two-Character Play,* Tennessee Williams. Translation, design, and direction, CRT
- *Funny Old Man,* Tadeusz Różewicz. Translation, design, and direction, CRT

[31] *A Knight*/Savāri was developed by the group under Ovanessian's direction as a Shiraz Arts Festival commission (10th anniversary). The text took shape with additional writing by Mahin Tajadod based on the Khordeh Avesta, Attar, Sohravardi, and Iranian mystical literature. For more details see Theatre I, *Fozieh Majd*, and Theatre III, *We Have Lost the Myth of our Times*.

1978

- *The Lady with a Little Dog*, Anton Chekhov. Adaptation, design and direction, AC
(in Armenian)

**CRT is temporarily closed (Jan. 3)**

"Crossroads Theatre was closed for a month to protest administrative problems with the new general manager Ali Rafi'ie. It reopened on Feb. 5 and continued operations after Nahid Mahdavi was appointed to the position."

- *A Knight*/Savāri, second version created for CRT, and for touring

**Is invited by Théâtre des Nations and UNESCO to present *A Knight*/Savāri in Caracas, Venezuela.**

**Designs sets and costumes for Sadreddin Zahed's productions at CRT:**

- *Request Concert,* Franz Xaver Kroetz
- *Buried Alive,* Sadeq Hedayat

**Is invited to present *The Lady with a Little Dog* at the twelfth Shiraz Arts Festival.**

"The Shiraz Festival's program committee had seen and selected the production. When the twelfth festival was cancelled due to the ongoing political turmoil in Iran, the Festival d'Automne invited it to be recreated with French actors at the Pompidou Center in Paris."

- *The Well,* Davoud Daneshvar. Set design for Reza Qasemi, TW
- *Far from Hagondange,* Jean-Paul Wenzel. Design and direction. CRT premiere on Nov. 26 cancelled due to martial law.

**CRT is shut down, the group dismantles, and in December, Ovanessian's work in Iran ends.**

1979

**Travels to Germany at the invitation of the Goethe Institute to visit and collaborate with theatres in Stuttgart, Berlin, and Munich (Feb. 4).**

**Settles in Paris (Feb. 20).**

2002-2003

**After a 23-year absence, visits Iran at the invitation of the Armenian Prelacy Council in Tehran to lead two theatre workshops in different locales in the city (30 Dec. 2002 – 24 Feb. 2003).**

- *Eight one-act Armenian plays*. Workshop rehearsals

2012

**Travels to Iran (6 Dec. 2012 - 12 Jan. 2013).**

**Is interviewed on camera by Zaven Qukasian, executive director of the Oral History Archive of Iranian Cinema, on location at the Museum of Cinema at Bagh-e Ferdows in Tehran.**

"Qukasian's audio-visual collection, which is housed at the Museum, is an exhaustive coverage of individuals affiliated with Iranian cinema. It is an invaluable resource for researchers into the history, substance, film schools, festivals and critical reviews of filmmaking in Iran."

2013

**The Museum of Cinema screens two Ovanessian films as part of a program at Bagh-e Ferdows:**

- *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life* (Tehran premiere)
- *Mrs. Ahou's Husband* (picnic sequence) — first public screening after almost half a century (Jan. 3).

## Creative Work Abroad Post-1979

### Theatre

### France

1979

- *La Dame au petit chien,* Anton Chekhov. Adaptation, design, and direction. Festival d'Automne, Centre Georges Pompidou

  "At the end of one of the performances of *The Lady with a Little Dog*, which was staged in Paris in November, several students asked if we could get together and talk about theatre. This was the genesis of the Armenian Theatre Association in Paris (ATA), which continues to produce works in Armenian today."

1983

- *Le Maître et Marguerite,* Mikhail Bulgakov. Co-direction with Andrei Serban, Théâtre de la Ville, Paris
- *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life,* based on the writings of Levon Shant, Vazguen Shoushanian, and Arshile Gorky. Playwright and director. ATA production. World premiere, *Hôtel de Saint-Aignan,* ICOMOS, rue du Temple, Paris; and presentation at the Nancy Cathedral, 16th NITF

"*'Embroidered Apron . . .'* — the result of three years of interactions and exchanges of ideas — was invited to the Nancy Festival in spring. Some of my friends as well as Peter Brook suggested making a film version of this work; hence, my continued collaboration with the group."

> *The "Apron" is a poetic work with ritual overtones, a mystery inspired by Armenian traditions, but not a copy. In the meditative setting of the Church of San Sebastian, the play assumes a sacred character in harmony with the spirit of the text, full of passion and doubt.*[32] -Francis Kochert

1987

- *The Marvellous Ones,* Yeghya Kasparian. Design and direction, with ATA. World premiere, Cathédrale Sainte-Croix de Paris des Arméniens

1988

- *The Chained One,* Levon Shant. Design and direction, with ATA. World premiere (complete version), Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière, Paris

1994

- *Act Without Words I & II,* Samuel Beckett. Design and direction, with ATA. Salle de Neuilly-Plaisance, Association Culturelle Arménienne de Marne-la-Vallée (ACAM)

1995

- *Pavana*, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio. Set and costume design for Dora Petrova's production, Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris

1999

- *For the Sake of the Other,* Levon Shant. Design and direction, with ATA. Théâtre Espace Acteur, Paris

2004

- *Konevets Quartet*, male vocal ensemble from St. Petersburg. Set design, Thetâtre des Bouffes du Nord, Paris

**United States**

2000

**Productions without décor directed at Columbia University:**

- *Spring Awakening,* Frank Wedekind, with first-year theatre students
- *Six plays by Chekhov,* masterclasses for third-year theatre students:
  - *Ivanov*

[32] "Un Tablier brodé d'exil." *Le Républicain Lorrain,* 2 June 1983.

- *The Seagull*
- *Uncle Vanya*
- *Three Sisters*
- *The Cherry Orchard*
- *The Sudden Death of a Horse*

### Canada

2007

**Productions without décor directed at l'Université de Moncton with drama students, Studio-théâtre La Grange:**

- *The Invasion,* Arthur Adamov
- *Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning,* William Saroyan

### Multiple Locations

1996-2018

- *Staged readings of unpublished and never performed 19th and 20th century Armenian plays, using minimal movement, sets, and props*:
  - Paris [over 140]. Toronto [2]. Yerevan [3]. New York [2]. Tehran [8]
  -

## Cinema

1985

- *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life.* Screenplay and direction; cinematography: Houshang Baharloo. Duration 110 mins., color, 35 mm. World premiere, 50th anniversary of the death of Komitas Vartabed, Théâtre Le Ranelagh (in Armenian with French subtitles). Other screenings:
  - Montreal Film Festival (with English subtitles)

> *For me, the best moments of this festival have not been the most highly anticipated films. Thus, I had never heard of the Armenian filmmaker Arby Ovanessian whose How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life is an extraordinary work, at once disconcerting and fascinating. How can one describe this literary and musical meditation on the original purity of the lost paradise, on the suffering of Armenians who experienced genocide and exile, on the recovery of serenity in maturity?*
>
> *In a unique and symbolic space, a number of sacred figures recite beautiful texts (borrowed for the most part from three great Armenian writers) in a beautifully composed counterpoint of varied*

> *sounds and Armenian music of different eras.*[33]
>
> -Francine Laurendeau

> *The audience was reduced in half after a few minutes. This is a "liturgical" film, however . . . A film that one watches the way one listens to a cantilena; a film that one absorbs the way one reads a poem. Arby Ovanessian is a poet for whom images are the signs of sensitivity, not to mention sensuality.*[34]
>
> -Léo Bonneville

- *Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema,* Pesaro, Italy (1986), screened along with *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus,* and *Parvana*
- Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
- Pompidou Center, Paris (2000 and 1993)
- Magic Cinema, Paris (2007)
- Moncton University Arts Festival, Canada (2007)

1986-1987

- *Rouben Mamoulian 88*: *Readings, Reflections and Reminiscences,* (documentary). Producer and director. Broadway and Hollywood director's last interview at age 88. Total footage 100 mins., color, 35 mm & 16 mm film, and Betacam video (unedited, in English)

2007

- *The Golden Age of Broadway and Hollywood*. Patrick Cazals, director (video documentary, 64 mins., color). Ovanessian presents excerpts of his 1986-87 video interviews and his private Mamoulian collection
- *Haratch 83* (documentary). Producer and director. Shot in Paris during the closing days of the paper's 83-year-old office and publishing house and its 83-year-old female director's daily sign-in routine. Total footage 18 hrs., color, digital camera (unedited, in Armenian and French)

*

In addition to the corpus of works listed above and described or commented on under Theatre I-IV and Cinema I-II, below, Ovanessian has authored *One Act*, a three-volume edition of forty, one-act Armenian plays, annotated with an introduction and a glossary, as well as numerous journal articles, reviews and research papers in Persian, Armenian, English, and French, a selection of which appears under Further Reading at the end of this publication.

[33] "Au Festival du nouveau cinéma : Un Arménien fascine, un Suisse déçoit." *Le Devoir,* 24 Oct. 1985.

[34] "Le Tablier brodé de ma mère s'étale dans ma vie." *Séquences,* 3-6 Jan. 1986.

In film, while collaborating with the Festival of Armenian Filmmakers in Paris during 1983-1989, Ovanessian served as the official representative of the Cinematographers' Union of ASSR to conduct research on Armenian filmmakers around the world. The outcome of the assignment — one-hundred and twenty films — was presented after the fall of the Soviet Union at the Georges Pompidou Center over three months in 1993.

In theatre, at the invitation of the Armenian Ministry of Culture, Ovanessian staged plays, prepared a detailed plan to modernize the repertoire of the Gabriel Sundukyan State Academic Theatre, and proposed a progressive educational program for the Yerevan Theatre Institute (1995-1996).

In the domains of culture and teaching, in addition to offering numerous lectures on theatre and cinema at cultural and academic institutions in France, U.S.A., U.K., Canada, and Norway, he was a guest lecturer at Columbia University where he taught theatre in the School of Arts and Sciences (1994 and 2000), and taught dramatic literature and Armenian cinema in the Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures (MELAC) (2005).

The highly acclaimed exhibition, *New Julfa*: *400 years of Armenian Presence in Isfahan,* curated by Arby Ovanessian, was among activities he undertook at the invitation of the cultural division of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. With an innovative, site-specific design, the exhibition was on display for three months at the Maison des Arts at Antony, Hauts-de-Seine (2007).

In 2009, thirty years after massive negative propaganda and zero accurate reporting on the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis, 1967-1978, The Iran Society invited Arby Ovanessian to give a public lecture on the festival's range of artistic programming. The talk, illustrated with slides, was given at the Pall Mall Room, the Society's headquarters on the third floor of the Army and Navy Club in London. Four years later, in October 2013, Asia Society organized an international symposium on the festival at its headquarters in New York where Ovanessian made a presentation titled, Shiraz Arts Festival: *An artist's perspective*.[35]

[35] Video recording of the lecture is posted under Events/Shiraz Arts Festival Symposium on the Asia Society website, and on www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2iFKmLxWag.

# Theatre

# I

# Collaborators, Commentators, Critics

## Elizabeth Forgan — *Critic*

*Tehran Journal*, 7 September 1968

### *All-Purpose Allegory Sets 'Em Talking*[1]

IT LOOKED as if it was never going to happen, but at last something has jolted the Shiraz Festival out of the depressing mood of apathy that has prevailed from its opening, and the healthy buzz of controversy is heard in the cafes and corridors. The cause of it is the play performed Thursday night: "Research on the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era" by Abbas Nalbandian, directed by Arby Ovanessian.

As a foreigner I approached the play knowing only that I could expect neither plot nor character development, that the dialogue would be entirely incomprehensible, and that the only key to the work was the theme of tragic and hopeless search — banal enough in the context of 20th century drama, after all.

So, for once uninhibited by the need to "understand" a play through the medium of language I was free to explore theater as an abstract visual and audio medium, as one would watch an unfamiliar religious ceremony or listen to instrumental music.

Fortunately, the ritual element in this play was its strongest feature. In a Pirandello-like fiction of a play-within-a-play, the stage directions were intoned by a mysterious chorus of 12 "assistant directors" robed and neutralized behind white veils immediately establishing the deliberate formalism of a liturgy. The characters wore blank white makeup stopping mask-like at the jaw, and still further depersonalized by the red wig each wore over his own hair. But most powerful in imposing the weight and symbolic eloquence of ritual was the pattern of movement which governed the play. Not only did individual characters take hierophantic poses to deliver monologues, but at crucial stages a formal semi-dance would suspend the action, sometimes for several minutes at a time, a slow progress around the circular disc on which the action took place, symbolizing fruitless search. So powerful was the illusion that the circle had some mystic significance, that when one character died and was rolled off the circle onto the surrounding blackness the effect was as shocking as if he had been thrown off a cliff.

Despite this odd suspension from the actual meaning of the words, however, the heavy symbolic content of the play could not be escaped. As each successive arrival fails to provide the answer to the character's search, a poet-mystic figure enters last of all, a crown of thorns on his head, and a crucifixion is enacted complete down to the figures of the centurion, Mary Magdalene and the women at the foot of the cross. The religious allegory could be extended in the Christian framework to include John the Baptist and St. Peter, but as Ovanessian explained, the author is seeking to evoke a religious association not limited to one specific faith. "Nalbandian's mind is one which seeks connections," he said. "The 12 assistant directors

[1] Original English text reproduced verbatim.

could be the 12 apostles of Christ, but also those of Mohammad, Zoroaster or the Buddha."

But, to the age of McLuhan, the medium is the message, and in the case of this play the creative effort of the director is as vital as that of the author himself. Apart from the technical efficiency of the production — impeccable choral speaking, visual variety and the design and décor themselves — Arby Ovanessian has nursed the jumble of ideas, events and associations that recklessly throws away the conventional props of rational development into [a] dramatic event which, he hopes, can "create and communicate through pure theatrical logic."

Having sat through the two-hour performance with not even a synopsis of a plot to furnish any other kind of logical guide, I may perhaps have been especially well qualified to confirm this hope.

## Houshang Hesami — *Critic*

*Keyhan*, 10 September 1968

### *A Hallucination Called Theatre at the Shiraz Arts Festival*

*A Novel and Profound and Colossal Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era,* this is the long title of an Iranian play that was presented at the Shiraz Arts Festival following a huge firestorm.

### *Its Author*

In this play, all of whose formative elements are derived from dramas by Brecht, Beckett, Pirandello, and John Osborne, the author has convened the characters in a zone that is presumably something like "the other world" where they're looking for "Zamenhof," which evidently means "peace" in Sanskrit![2]

First, we see a black-clad man onstage with his green scarf dropping to the floor reading a book. A drum sounds and twelve green-clad men with covered faces enter from two sides of the stage and take their seats. As they cry out "Fog vacates the stage, Fog fills the stage" in chorus, a man enters muttering "Zamenhof". This is the first character in the play who is searching for "someone" or conceivably, "something".

The play begins. Another man enters who's also looking for someone. And a third man also arrives, exhausted from his journey. A white-clad, red-haired, pale-faced woman arrives. This one is looking for a tall, burly, and shrewd "thief"!

After this woman, another woman arrives who is a prostitute looking for a man. A man and a woman also arrive together fresh off the trail. The man is tired of sleeping overmuch with the woman and the woman is suffering from something obscure.[3] All these personalities start an aimless journey in the manner of Brecht's characters in *The Exception and the Rule.* Finally, a

[2] The name is in fact a nod to the physician L.L. Zamenhof, aka *Doktoro Esperanto* (1859-1917). A Polish Jew who experienced widespread racial and national conflicts living on the Polish Russian borderland, Zamenhof developed an artificial language to promote tolerance and named it after his pseudonym, Esperanto, "one who hopes".

[3] The woman (Yoshākhog) is searching for her lost dog.

Christ-like man arrives that the others lay their hopes on, and the upshot of that hope is also zilch! Oh, and they all enter declaiming "Zamenhof".

### *Sheer Hallucination*

*A Novel and Profound and Colossal Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era* is undoubtedly "sheer hallucination"; in this play, no goal is pursued at all. The author does not have a specific line of thought and has transfigured the characters into diligent nightingales, so they may shower the audience with assorted drivel and bedazzle them as in: *Extraordinary*! *Iranian theater has been rescued. A genius glowed*; *someone who'd never seen theatre wrote the most electrifying national drama.*

Nalbandian — who they're making into an instant genius! — himself doesn't know what he wanted to, or perhaps wants to say.

He's busy with a bunch of words and sayings, from Lenin to Forough Farrokhzad. Zamenhof signifies an unformed and baseless inner want that has become the central axis of the text and which everyone in this play is chasing after.

All the main characters of Nalbandian's play resort to a poetic expression from a prosaic one, and finally to a mournful "dirge" onstage that serves as the music for the "Christ-like" man's "striptease".

The audience can never identify the "characters" in this play because they basically don't have a "personality," or put another way, "individuality".

The characters look hard and jarring and may be as lost as the author himself. Each one who arrives delivers a poetic proclamation about their life and when the "biography" turns a new page, joins the others and the search continues. It's in the thick of this self-same search that the prostitute advises "bananas and walnuts and so forth" are good for potency and the audience is showered with filthy expletives — and for no reason at all!

*A Novel and Profound and Colossal Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era* is a sheer hallucination and a mockery of theatre. It's impossible to pen anything on its behalf — though I'm sure some highfaluting intellectuals will make a giant out of every person in this play — the dialogues and the characters are so wretched that wherever you turn, you hit an empty space, a blinded mind, a dark and risible world.

### *The Production*

This time, Arby Ovanessian who had previously staged *Miss Julie* — also unsuccessfully — has shown he can be counted definitively among impressive and qualified theater figures in this land. Arby was able to connect the links of the disconnected play with a deliberated production design, powerfully and in a completely unexpected way, and at least based on his enthralling theatrical forms, compel the audience to endure the play. Arby was highly successful in integrating "ta'ziyeh," the "distancing effect," and "Greek theatre" in the production. What a pity that so much effort was at the service of naught.

Arby showed his command of creating original theatrical forms and movements, but he had

not paid attention to the actors' "delivery". His attempt to show the characters' vagrancy, to produce brisk motions and activity onstage, and to generate a chimerical atmosphere bore fruit but owing to the play itself, all those efforts were in vain.

Arby Ovanessian, whom we shall rank among worthy theatre directors from now on, ought to be careful; choosing plays like this, which do not exhibit a pivot or a foothold, is a mistake and will waste him. Arby ought to put his solid understanding of theatre at the service of works that the audience can also partake of and which can bring them closer to his perspective.

"There is no-one there to help" cannot be the gist of a play today and that is something Arby Ovanessian ought to make sure he remembers.

***The Acting***

The actors in this production were young, like its author, and among them were a few seasoned ones. The set, which was a cloud made of metal strips was interesting, as were the costumes where much attention had been paid to color-coordination.

Anyhow, suffice it to say that endorsing such plays undoubtedly poses a great danger for people who may be in the throes of cultivating their hidden talents in playwriting. The danger is that by witnessing this production and its favorable reception by those who for the wrong reasons are branded as "intellectual," a playwright who is writing a simple work free of phony intellectual conceits will end up wasted. And one last word: Congratulations to those who discovered Brecht, Pirandello, Osborne, and Beckett at one fell swoop in a singular individual like Nalbandian. Seriously, well done.

## Amir Taheri — *Critic*

*Keyhan International,* 17 Dec. 1968

### *Tehran Gets Look at the 'Fossils': Eight characters are depicted searching for the unknown, symbolized by the catchword "Zamenhov".*[4]

**THE first performance in Tehran of Abbas Nalbandian's play "Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era" on Sunday night had the effect of an electric shock on a select audience of intellectuals, poets, dramatists and the like.**

When the play was first presented in Shiraz during the festival in September it created a great deal of controversy; there were boos and moans followed by debates and walkouts. And the audience in Shiraz was equally divided into two opposing camps praising the newsboy's prize-winning piece or condemning it as a cheap and worthless attempt at sophistication.

In Tehran, however, the audience was simply undecided; few people present allowed themselves to be enthusiastic one way or the other. In fact, I had never seen an Iranian audience so set by doubts after having seen a play.

[4] Original English text reproduced verbatim.

Nalbandian may sound crude, deliberately scathing and at times, even banal. His use of four-letter words, which are incidentally also made of four letters in Persian, may be no more than an anachronism and he certainly doesn't enjoy a firm control over the material he uses. But he is unmistakably original and this, in a world of imitators who think in a mechanical fashion is a quality to admire.

The director, Arby Ovanessian, has done a great deal to exploit the few dramatic possibilities offered by the text. As a director Ovanessian has a fine control over the entire production and he communicates with the forceful tones of a visual poet. His great merit lies in the fact that he has been able to make a clean break with naturalistic theatre and as a result given himself the chance to make full use of theatrical elements not limited by space, time and dogmatism.

The actors were up to the best of standards and showed that given imaginative direction they could make full use of their talents.

## Iraj Zohari — *Writer, critic, translator*

Tehran, winter 2003

**When did you start as a [theatre] critic?** [5]

My first review was about *Miss Julie*, Arby Ovanessian's production.

**Why did so many critics label Arby Ovanessian a formalist?**

He designed the set for most of his works himself and from the standpoint of aesthetics, that was important to him. Other directors left this task to the decorator; the potential for discord between the set designer and the director is a very serious problem. Arby Ovanessian's works verged on the visual arts in their integrity and composition. He conceived his mises en scène in line with the meaning and the theme of the play. Directors that considered content and form to be separate found this odd. And if they called him a formalist it's only because they failed to understand the content of his works. Form and content coincided in his works.

**How would you describe the bedrock of his productions?**

Based on the productions that I've seen, I can say that he aspired to the standards of Western theatre and aesthetics. At the same time, one can detect his Armenian and Iranian sensibilities in some of his works, including in his remarkable productions of *On the Way*[6] by Shant and *All at Once*/Nāgahan[7] by Nalbandian.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all interviews in this section were conducted by the author.

[6] Reviewed by Amir Taheri, "Another Thumping Hit for Ovanessian." *Keyhan International*, 4 May 1969: 3.

[7] See further Iraj Zohari, "*Nagahan . . .* Trajhedy-i az Abbas Na'albandian." *Tamasha*, Shiraz Arts Festival daily bulletin, 8 Sep. 1972: 5; reprinted in Majid Lashkari, *Teatr va Cinema-ye Arby Ovanessian*, Lashkari & Rowzaneh, 2014 (henceforth, Lashkari/*TC*): 810-812.

**Questions of the performance space and the use of real time in theatre have been of interest to Arby Ovanessian. How important is that factor in his productions?**

Yes, the use of real time and space was woven into the production of *Vīs o Ramin*. Some types of works call for a specific time and space, like *ta'ziyeh* which cannot be performed anywhere other than in *tekkiyehs* [religious assembly halls] and dedicated settings during the month of Moharram, and where the audience is fully participatory. Arby Ovanessian tried to conjure the same phenomenon by using locales like Persepolis. That is where he abandoned the classical stage. Or take *Caligula*, which had different productions in different locales and whose mise en scène varied depending on the space.

He was always present among the group, like Grotowski who participated in all his productions like a teacher. Ovanessian believed in revisiting productions and introducing changes as needed in connection with the audience.

**How would you characterize his contribution to shaping modern Iranian theatre? How did those experiences help connect Iranian and Western theatre?**

When a work is not framed within the limits of Iranian arts and culture, it achieves universality. Others were incapable of producing works the way he did. Nalbandian and Ovanessian followed a different line of thought, which is why their works did not conform to common theatrical norms and had a universal thrust and language.

## Houshang Azadivar — *Filmmaker, poet, translator*

Tehran, spring 2006

**Let's start with when you first met Arby; you were his assistant for a while . . .**

I was his student at the NITV School of Film and Television; I became his assistant on his film, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, in my internship period. Afterwards, I once went over to TW to tape their productions for television; that is where I became his assistant in theatre, and our work led to a long-term friendship. He is the reason I became attracted to theatre, and all my learning about theatre was through him. His devotion to art, especially to theatre, marked me. In my view, he is one of the few theatre professionals that has influenced Iranian theatre.

TW was truly a sacred working space. For the first time in Iran, we had five plays in repertory a week and sometimes performed two on the same day. The City Players Group was able to always have five plays available to perform and work on others. It happened that some of the actors were cast in all five plays. Only Arby could manage such a program, something that had never been practiced before. There was no such repertory in Iranian theatre in the past and I doubt if it will recur in the future.

At TW our brochures were printed a month in advance, complete with the title, day, and hour of all upcoming programs. We were there from 9 AM till midnight — lived there really, in search of a theatre language with Iranian sensibilities.

**Reviews mention his focus on collaboration and shared goals. To what extent did he in fact let collaboration shape the group's work, and to what extent did he give the actors the opportunity to share in the process?**

One hundred percent. Picking a play and pre-assigning each actor a role and moving forward from there is not something that he ever did. He would pick a play that was compatible with the venue, the actors, the budget, and available options and then experiment with it. He even allowed actors who were not part of the group to be present during tryouts and rehearsals. Tryouts were continual. In the process, he would draw out the talents. Nothing was premeditated. His goal was to find and connect an idea at the heart of the play to the audience, in that space. The fact is, he was mainly concerned with the essence of the play; the rest depended on the actors' talents and the work process.

**As an assistant and in exchanging ideas with him, what sort of questions came up? And how much information and advance knowledge of his working method did you have?**

I often used to go over to his house in the evening when the rehearsals were over, or we would stay late at TW to talk about the rehearsals and the obscure layers of a play. In our discussions, we exchanged ideas about solutions. His knowledge of theatre and dramatic literature was extensive. Our conversations were broader than to be confined to theatre; we also talked about aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, and so forth.

**What was the process for acquainting the actors with a play?**

The text was read without any explication and in diverse ways. As the actors gradually grew closer to the characters, Arby would ask them to read the text in a different tone. For instance, an actor would read a dialogue in both a sad and a cheerful way. That exercise would continue as long as necessary until the full capacity of the text was bared. A lot of emphasis was placed on articulation and on communicating the meaning of words.

**Evidently, he placed a special emphasis on delivery. Did his emphasis have to do with the latent meaning of dialogues or the vocal quality of words?**

All the dimensions; the content, emotional, and acoustic dimensions inherent in words; also, a search for the unknown, and at times obscure, dimensions of the text that was beyond the actors' reach. He gave the actors a chance to discover and proffered that a sentence can be vocalized in different ways. He was interested in the fusion of human voices and the acoustics onstage, and in the space that sounds create.

**Critics labeled him a formalist. Was that interpretation prompted by the imagery and the artful designs of his works or were there other reasons?**

Some critics lacked a deep understanding of theatre and were not used to looking for content in the form and framework. For instance, they assumed that *The Cherry Orchard* was simply a play about the emerging post-feudal bourgeoisie. That assumption is not an important point of the play at all. On examining the dialogues of Chekhov's characters, one discovers

very deep, transparent, double meanings. We looked for the pauses, the transfigurations of the characters, and the descriptions of the scenes. More than realistic, Chekhov's plays are truly theatrical. To represent Chekhov's play, one has to display the form and composition of its theatrical content; an emphasis on light, movement, sound, and color serves to access the inner content of the play so that Chekov's text may be embodied.

Ovanessian's production of Chekhov was unique. I know that it was even copied outside Iran. In my view, *The Cherry Orchard* was Arby's masterpiece; the hard work — both theoretical and practical — that went into designing the special rehearsals and exercises helped the actors develop.

**How extensively were the special exercises used? Were they designed after the play reading phase?**

There was a special exercise for each scene as many varieties were used as needed. There were also exercises independent of the play.

**Was there a specific timeframe for play reading before starting special exercises?**

Play readings and special exercises were concurrent. The actors would articulate the text in different modes, with movement. In every scene a variety of approaches to the dialogue was tested. In the process, the actors inevitably learned the text by heart.

**Were any technical features like lighting, sound, and costume design tried out during the special exercises?**

By the time a play reading was over, we invariably had more material than we needed. We would select whatever seemed fitting and good and do a final montage for the designs as well. Lighting and wardrobe were fine-tuned during the same phase. Altogether, everything was tried out simultaneously and recorded, and because he himself was the set designer, he deliberated on all these elements at the same time.

**What were your personal responsibilities?**

Oversee the actors, coordinate the group's activities, discuss miscellaneous points and consult with the director following the rehearsals, and work on the actors' diction and on the text. Nobody had a fixed or specific task. Occasionally, there was even a chance that the roles would change. Even those who did not have a part were obligated to attend the rehearsals.

**Was he flexible enough to let an actor, if they had a problem, to drop out of the group?**

He had that flexibility. Except, if someone violated the decided atmosphere and discipline, then he wasn't flexible. His priority was for the group to work in harmony and not proceed with personal interpretations, and for everyone to uphold teamwork.

**What contingencies were weighed, from analysis to spatial arrangements and the mise en scène?**

What he noted in a play at the outset was its atmosphere and worldview and the question of how that world might be drawn out from the text and connect. As to how that might happen, he wouldn't interfere, but he tried to realistically draw out the creative potential of his working capital, meaning the actors that worked with him full time.

Some actors occasionally complained because a lot of pressure was put on them for their full potential to spill into the open. Some actors are unable to express their inner life and are inclined to merely simulate the part. Human beings are little-known creatures full of hidden talents who discover their abilities once they find themselves in an alternate, and sometimes difficult, situation; until then, they may be unaware of their gifts and abilities. That is the opportunity he offered his actors. For instance, it wasn't as if *Caligula* was defined by a single form and meaning and that its message was purely anti-dictatorship; rather, Arby wanted it to reflect the spirit of the age of a dictatorial society as well. He wanted to understand how far an individual might go under conditions of dictatorship and what they might do. That required a broader take on the play's political outlook.[8] Shahbanou Farah was expected to attend the performance of *Caligula* in Tachareh at Persepolis, but Sazeman-e Amniat [state security apparatus] forestalled it at the last minute.

**What was Ovanessian's view of then-current political platforms, given that they had been clearly articulated by political groups?**

He never pandered to the regime and was in fact under pressure. TW had a small budget, and he and a group of art cognoscenti made every effort to produce original works with minimum funding. It's important to note that it was intellectuals and leftists that planted the seeds of theatre in Iran. At the time, most people associated with theatre had the same political leanings and expected everyone working in theatre to be of a similar mind. Arby wasn't like that. He was a free spirited and creative artist interested in humanity, the meaning of life, and aesthetics. But those on the right were also hostile toward him, because he disagreed with them.

City Theatre was so named by individuals that were of the same mind as he.[9] The Shiraz Arts Festival's artistic directors asked him to lead it, but he declined. He founded Crossroads Theatre/*Chahar-su* and even installed the acoustic panels in that hall himself. These are the historical facts of our theatre. In my view, the value of his work is beyond measure.

**During a Shiraz Arts Festival public forum to review and critique *Research*/Pazhuheshi,[10] a group of Ministry of Arts and Culture directors and actors, and a few critics, left the room in protest. His later work and his film, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, continued to be the target of their attacks. Did this opposition stem from their preference for the Ministry's model for**

[8] Terry Graham, "Ovanessian Gives Caligula a Dual Role." *Keyhan International,* 18 Aug. 1974: 6.

[9] The newly-built theatre was named *Teatr-e Shahr*/City Theatre at the suggestion of Reza Ghotbi, Farrokh Gaffari, Bijan Saffari, and Arby Ovanessian; hence, the TW group's designation, *Gorouh-e Bazigaran-e Shahr*/City Players Group.

[10] Second forum held at Pahlavi University to discuss *Research*/Pazhuheshi following its premiere at the Open-Air Theatre, Hafeziyeh Stadium, on 7 Sep. 1968. For more information on happenings at the forum, see "Miz-e Gerd-e Dovvom." *Ayandegan,* 16 Sep. 1969. For Ovanessian's notes on the production in Tehran, see Theatre IV, *A Modern, Profound . . .*

**theatre or from their political position?**

Varying scenarios played out in different periods. *Research*/Pazhuheshi, for instance, generated a tremendous theatrical controversy.[11] After the official announcement of the playwriting competition by NITV, Arby who was on the jury insisted the play was stageable whereas even someone like Fereydoun Rahnema believed it was not. It was a different type of work than people were used to. Both the play and the production were completely outside of the purview of theatrical conventions in Iran, with a strange and captivating ritualistic form in its text and dramatic expression that became tangible through Arby's production.

*Research*/Pazhuheshi is the first production of a modern play in the history of Iranian theatre. Following its success, and at the suggestion of Reza Ghotbi, Arby began working at TW and from that moment on was targeted by critics. They called him the royalists' crony, for example! That's because most of our theatre people leaned left, while all he wanted to do in his life was work; he was not interested in siding with any political faction. He even questioned partisanship.

**What is the legacy of works from that period for the theatre generation today?**

What we see a lot these days is non-narrative theatre. I can detect and see clear traces of the past in the works of young people. In their workshop approach, the types of plays they choose, and in movement, lighting, and acting . . . today's directors are the living legacy of the TW experience.

**What was his advice to actors on what to do outside of rehearsals? Did he recommend that they read books on the playwright, or to stop reading altogether?**

When not in rehearsal, he interacted with the group like a teacher or a therapist. If someone had difficulties with some aspect of the rehearsals, he would talk to them and try to parse and unlock their potential. Sometimes he would even figure out their personal problems. But as to recommending or insisting on reading a book to better understand the play, no, he didn't do that.

He respected every individual's aptitude and background. He could even work with people that had never been trained as actors; all that was necessary was a willingness to express their inner feelings and bare their soul before the audience. He would not let any actor step onstage with a preconceived and conventional notion of their role; theatre was meaningful to him if there was discovery in it for the actor.

**What sort of conditions did he create to help the actors achieve that?**

Applying various exercises that were aimed at the intended atmosphere of the play, actors were able to find their hidden inner voice, their talents, the good and the ugly.

[11] For coverage by *Keyhan International* see A Special Correspondent, "Debate Over Play Continues." *Keyhan Int'l*, 10 Sep. 1968, and Our Own Correspondent, "Play's Critics Stage a Walkout." *Keyhan Int'l*, 11 Sep. 1968: 6.

**Was he present at every performance?**

Yes.

**How much effort was put in the rehearsals to let an actor achieve a personal awareness?**

One hundred percent. For instance, if an actor was replaced by another, he would also change the nature of the rehearsals.

**With prior knowledge of the actors?**

Yes, he came to know them gradually.

**Did he work with amateurs the same way?**

Yes, some people with little experience were also able to produce good work. They grew there, in effect. He had keen eyes and could detect a talent that an actor did not have the courage to expose. He created the conditions where actors could find such courage.

**Did he use objects in a way that made them function like a character? How did he exactly use props and other elements of the stage such as lighting, color, and sound?**

For him, objects were as communicative and expressive as actors. Sound and light were not used as ornaments but were at the service of the drama unfolding onstage and always served a dramatic function. None of his works were like one another. He wasn't interested in telling a story but wanted to create a sense, a language, and a theatrical universe.

**Who were his models?**

He was very knowledgeable about the works of Stanislavski, Vakhtangov, Appia, Craig, Artaud, and Brecht and knew Brook, Grotowski, Kantor, and Serban and many others personally. He used different techniques in his work, not as an end but as a means. Arby had his own platform in theatre that could inspire a special genre of art. His group had something to say to the world of theatre.

**Peter Brook borrowed the idea of presenting theatre in real time at a non-stage site from *Vīs o Ramin*, which he had seen at Persepolis a year before *Orghast*.**[12]

Yes, in *Vīs o Ramin,* even the position of the sun in the sky was an integral part of the performance. As the sun set behind the columns in Persepolis, a related mise en scène unfolded before it. Even the columns were put to dramatic use.[13] Brook also applied the idea of using sunrise and sunset in *Orghast*.

[12] See Amir Taheri, "*Orghast*: Bridging the Language Gap." *Keyhan International,* 3 Sep. 1971: 9.

[13] See Theatre III, *Vīs and Ramin.*

**In those days, new views had emerged in the theatre arts in regards connecting to the audience, the audience's station, and ways to pull them into the aura of the play. He had unique experiences in that area among Iranian directors and tried to create an atmosphere whereby on entering the performance space, the audience would be in alignment with the spirit of the play.**

That's the same concept that is found in *ta'ziyeh*. *Ta'ziyeh* uses Ashura symbolism to induce drama and stage a ritual. Greek tragedy, too, which was a wholly socio-religious ritual took place at a specific time and day to transform a moment in a staged performance into a cosmic moment. Adolph Appia and Gordon Craig also worked toward drawing theatre closer to ritual.

**How were *All at Once*/Nagahan and *A Knight*/Savāri received abroad?**

*All at Once*/Nagahan had a very warm reception at NITF; that festival is where then-leading figures in theatre used to present their work.[14] I saw *A Knight*/Savāri in Caracas;[15] the group presented at La MaMa in New York as well.

On the second presentation of *All at Once*/Nagahan, which was performed at midnight in the Delgosha Pavilion in Shiraz, festival organizers were concerned about audience reaction and police had surrounded the site in advance. I remember that before the start of the show, Arby announced that we will not begin the performance until these gentlemen vacate the area. They left the place; the atmosphere recovered its sacredness and a real connection obtained in time and space. No-one dared say such things in those days. Theatre should turn into a happening.

**Did the singularity of his work deter from attracting large audiences?**

Contrary to what people often say about him, his works attracted large audiences. He had respect for the audience, except for those that walked in with prefixed positions. By contrast, he was fascinated by the effect of his work on anyone with an open mind who came to watch the play with no prejudgment or position -à-vis him.

## Attila Pessiani — *Actor, director*

Tehran, spring 2006

**What are the differences between Arby Ovanessian's earlier and later works?**

One can divide Iranian theatre into two parts, before and after *Research*/Pazhuheshi. That work is a very significant milestone that changed the Iranian audience's outlook on theatre. It was entirely original. For that reason, it was fraught with a surge of fiercely clashing sentiments. It was reviewed in the press for months. Naturally, some people rejected it because our

[14] For additional commentary see Maria Berwid and Zbigniew Osinski, "IX swiatowy Festival Nancy *73*." *Kronika* (*Dialogue*), 1973: 191.

[15] Reviewed by Terry Graham, "A Theatre in a Living Tradition." *Tamasha*, Shiraz Arts Festival daily bulletin 1976, 31 Aug. 11-12 and Sep. 1: 11; reprinted in *IV Saison Mondial du Théâtre des Nations/IV Sesión Mundial del Teatro de las Naciones*, Caracas 1978: 82-85.

critics generally react to all things new negatively before they gradually acquiesce. *Research*/Pazhuheshi was a quantum leap and a singular perfection, a great achievement in Iran that also has international stature.

He never excludes experimentation from his works but presents productions with a precise and analytical performance, particularly thorough understanding, and a very powerful aesthetic.

**Could you talk about individual works and compare his earlier and later productions?**

His earlier productions in Iran while outwardly varied were relatively similar in terms of genre and experimentation.[16] I think their apogee is *Caligula*, a production that falls in the the same category as *The Cherry Orchard*, *Man, Beast and Virtue*, and *Little Eyolf*, and was staged at City Theatre. The deciding factor in his set designs was basically his choice of performance space, which was part and parcel of his design, like the production of *Caligula* at Tachareh in Persepolis or *All at Once*/Nagahan at the Delgosha Pavilion in Shiraz. Each of these sites greatly influenced his work and was selected quite consciously.

Arby always took the architecture of the space into account, not only in the sense of the building's physical structure but also of other effects it might have on the audience, even on a psychological level. He knew well how to interact with the small hall at TW mentally and experimentally. I remember he once did a special tryout for *The Cherry Orchard* at TW. It was a strange experience that created something like a flashback, as if the performance were its own mirror; that is, there was a flashback within a flashback, which had a very powerful effect.

**Evidently, he also paid great attention to diction and the significance of sound and silence.**

It was his experience that it's not only the meaning of a line that counts but also its form; just as actors express a mode with their body as they move, they do the same with words as they speak.

**Most critics called him a formalist, but he himself does not accept that; he believes form is at the service of content and that his productions were on that track.**

In his work, formalism is conceptual not ornamental. In those days, critics used formalism as an insult. Aesthetics was very conspicuous in his works — his use of colors, for instance and how to make them expressive onstage. His lighting, costume, and set design, and the actors' comportment and movements were always conceptual and never meant to be just beautiful. In *All at Once*/Nagahan, he took the actual spirit of the Delgosha Pavilion into account, the brick walls and the grim undertones of the alcoves around the structure. In another performance of this same play at CT, he mounted very high walls onstage that made the audience feel small and stifled. The actor who played the landlord was perched on top of a tall tree at a height that dominated the stage and had totally transformed the space.

[16] For a review of Ovanessian's experimental work (e.g., Peter Handke's *My Foot My Tutor*) see Jamshid Chalangi, "Noqte-i keh az Moharrek-e Khod Joda Mishavad." *Mardom,* 24 Feb. 1974.

**In his mise en scène for *Caligula*, did the two actors who jointly played Caligula appear onstage together?**

Not necessarily, they appeared together in most scenes. There was a mental and visual dichotomy between the two Caligulas. For instance, in the scene where Caligula is supposed to dance, Arby did something very interesting; two kinds of music, Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and belly dance music, aired simultaneously. On one side of the stage, one was balletic and on the other side the other did an Arabic dance. The audience could see and hear both on either side of the stage. Or another scene where one of the Caligulas slaughters the patricians and the senators while the other one sits in a corner and doesn't interfere.

**Mise en scène is double-edged: it has an equal chance to enhance or obscure key points in a text.**

Yes, that depends on the director, or the text's potential, or the performance. In his mises en scène Arby treated all the elements conceptually.

**How was the actor's diction treated in *Caligula*? Was there a special drawl in the speech, or a tone associated with the historical period of the play?**

The diction was modern. Even the costumes had very simple designs. Black tops and pants and army boots, which were not that different really.

**Meaning the costumes did not signify any particular period or concept?**

Not at all. Even Caligula's costume wasn't different from the other actors.

Before the play began, the seating areas were lit up and half the performance spaces were dark, which was reversed when the performance began. As the audience entered, indistinct noises could be heard that sounded like wailing and howling. We could see some of the characters against the wall, such as the bride that was curling up on herself. From the start, the sound design also made us feel like we were in a haunted, terrifying, and nightmarish space.

***Caligula* begins just after the sister's death. The sound design that you described, was it perhaps meant to evoke mourning?**

Yes, mourning. It even interjected fear. On nearing the Tachareh bathhouse — where the play was staged at Persepolis — and on hearing those sounds, the audience would anticipate a special ambience and then walk into that very ambience.

**Given that he didn't use objects simply for their functional value, how were they applied in the productions?**

In his work, the selection of objects for the stage was also always based on a type of choice that stemmed from a concept.

**In which of his works was this selection more evident and had a novel meaning and implication?**

In *Self-Accusation,* the lights were turned on the audience. It essentially worked in reverse where the audience was in the light and the actor was in silhouette. We could see two people in outline, pitch black. A board directly faced the audience at a relatively far distance, large; light bulbs were mounted across its entire surface.[17] Two actors stood in front of it. Throughout the performance, we almost never saw their faces; in fact, they were in silhouette and in total blackness to the end of the production. I heard from Arby that in his film recording of that performance the camera starts moving toward the actors very slowly until it reaches their faces at the end of the performance, moves past, and stops on an image of four shining light bulbs. Apparently, the film was shot in one take.

**Please tell us about *A Knight*/Savāri**

It was performed at the tomb of Artaxerxes II at the top of the mountain overlooking Persepolis where a large wooden floor in front of the tomb served as the stage. This wooden floor stretched over the edge of the precipice and was suspended over the canyon. The audience was seated on three sides among the rock walls; the actors emerged from inside the tomb, which is cut in the mountain. The performance took place a few hundred yards above Persepolis.

As a rule, his designs were not tied to a single form or meaning but were multivalent.

I remember that the acting was very self-assured.

**What were some unique features of *The Funny Old Man* at CRT?**

At the beginning of the show, three young girls played with a pram in the lobby. When the entrance door to the theatre opened, the audience was led to follow the children in the direction of the auditorium.

The play was a two-hour monologue by an old man before large-sized dolls that looked like him and were judges. In the comedy, the dolls were arranged behind him and Susan Taslimi, a female judge, sat among them, motionless. In the final seconds, she would stand up and leave the stage. That concentration and stillness was so astonishing that at first everyone thought she was just another doll.

The court accuses this old man of having a perverse fondness for young girls. During the play, the old man tries to defend himself and denies the accusation, but during his defense we notice a contradiction in his behavior.[18]

**What are some of the reasons TW was shut down?**

Before the onset of the revolution, the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Arts and Cul-

[17] Twenty-one lamps shone along the width and the height of the frame, a total of 441 across the surface.

[18] Reviewed by Mansur Koushan, "Shahadati bar Harekat-e Daroun." *Rastakhiz,* 3 Dec. 1977: 3; reprinted in Lashkari/*TC*: 870-875.

ture and backward critics tried to convince the public that TW operated under the patronage of Farah and the incontrovertible dictatorship of Reza Ghotbi, and that the individuals who worked there had no qualifications other than that boundless support — which in fact wasn't the case. As soon as the Islamic Revolution happened, all those vengeful people shut down TW within a month with very effective propaganda, an unprecedented move against a small entity like TW.

## Varooj Soorenian — *Writer, translator*

Tehran, summer 2006

**In your view, what is the significance of Arby Ovanessian's works?**

He paid great attention to raising the audience's aesthetic sensibilities. He was always searching for new ideas in theatre, and it was this search and his innovative productions that set his work apart from that of his contemporaries. To give you an example, his first work in Persian, *Miss Julie,* opened almost at the same time as Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit,* which was directed by Pari Saberi [in Tehran] and featured famous actors. All three actors in Arby's production were first time novices, nevertheless, there's no comparison between these two productions — from set- and lighting design to the mise en scène and the actors' movements onstage. In every aspect of the production of *Miss Julie*, there was an aesthetic sense and a harmonious flow of thought that utterly mesmerized a perceptive audience.[19]

**Please talk about *The Respectable Beggars* where you had a role.**

*The Respectable Beggars* is originally a novel by the famous Armenian satirist Hakop Baronin. Arby applied Vakhtangov's method in mounting its theatrical version. The characters, wearing heavy and exaggerated make up, and vividly colorful, ill-fitting clothes, were quite grotesque and looked more like dolls than humans. The set was highly innovative and original and the mise en scène was such that it reflected the author's intent to the letter — which was to parody the unsavory aspects of the Armenian community in late 19th century Constantinople.

The story is about a wealthy, provincial landowner who has come to the capital to pick a woman for a bride but gets fenced in by a variety of people, all of whom try to rip him off so to speak. Because the locations constantly change during the novel, Arby found a very smart solution: he designed a minimal set where all its components were toy-like, which was completely in character with the production, and could also rapidly transform the set from one location into another, for instance, the street into the house and then the restaurant or the barber shop, and so on.

In my view, this is one of the best comedies ever produced in Iran. At the start, the actors begin putting on their costumes in front of the audience. With that, they're effectively telling the audience to expect a play or a puppet show, and that more than forty years ago when directors were still going for realism in their works.[20]

[19] For additional commentary see Haroutyun Minassian, "Oriord Julie." *Kulis,* Mar. 1968: 24-26.

[20] For a review of the production see Lida Berberians, "Metzapativ Moura t'skanner." *Alik*, 25 Mar. 1968: 4, 8.

**What about *Hedda Gabler?***

Forty-five years on and I still remember the aura that Arby had conjured in that production was a genuinely Scandinavian aura. Arby has been successful in that respect in the majority of his works.

**What was that atmosphere like specifically?**

*Hedda Gabler* wore a dark purple dress that sometimes tended to ruby red, which is the color of sacrificial blood. Also, a piece of white hide lay on the floor upstage, which evoked sacrificial ground. When she stepped on it, she symbolically invoked the image of the sacrifice.[21] In his production of Peter Gill*'s The Sleeper's Den*, he showed poverty without any exaggeration whatsoever. Everything was in its place onstage and clearly indicated poverty. Nevertheless, the design and the image of that scene betrayed a tenderness that was consistent with the poetic spirit of the play.

Arby played a significant role in advancing theatre design in Iran because there were always true aesthetic features in his works.

**Please talk about *On the Way* and its storyline.**

Levon Shant's play, *On the Way,* takes place a short time before the onset of the Armenian Genocide by the Ottomans in 1895. Arby had covered the whole stage in white.

The Armenian national liberation movement that had started in Europe has moved across to Turkey. A young political activist in Constantinople falls in love with the young sister of the man whose house he is living in. The young man — the lead character — declares that he has finally decided to join the guerilla fighters. In the play, the love of freedom while living peacefully and comfortably in a racist state is examined and questioned. The young woman's brother is reproachful of the youth and asks his sister, 'If he loved you why did he leave you and go away?' She replies that 'If he hadn't left, he wouldn't be the person I loved,' and the play ends with her suicide.

In the last scene, a vivid red light splashed like drops of blood on the wall upstage facing the audience; it was as if by bloodying the white background the director was holding that clean and peaceful life, and even the audience (society), responsible for the suicide — which was an existentialist take on the play. In the production of *On the Way,* everyone wore white except the little girl who had witnessed the slaughter of her family in her native village, who was dressed in grey. He used minimal props in his productions. He never cluttered the stage with extraneous objects.

**What are your thoughts about Levon Shant? Arby Ovanessian is very fond of this writer and has produced several of his plays.**

Shant is a notable Armenian writer. His works include analytical and philosophical writings as

[21] See Margaret Mellor, "Director Creates Illusory Departure from Ibsen." *Tehran Journal*, 21 Feb. 1970: 5, and Parviz Mamnoon, "Niayeshi barayeh Kheeshtan." *Ayandegan*, 24 Feb. 1970: 3, reprinted in Lashkari/*TC*: 776- 780.

well as several novels and nine plays. Most of his plays have a philosophical thrust. In addition to producing some of his works, Arby has published a very extensive study of Shant's plays that occupies a special place in contemporary Armenian literary criticism.[22] In three plays whose stories are contemporaneous with the author, Shant poses the question of choice. Of these three, Arby has produced *For the Sake of the Other* and *On the Way*. The lead character in both plays is at a crossroads and has to make a choice and decide about his future in existential circumstances. In all three plays, the character chooses the difficult path, a path that is certain not to lead to happiness.

**Since leaving Iran, to what extent has he maintained his relationship with Iranian art and culture and with the Armenian community?**

He keeps abreast of arts and cultural events and developments in Iran. He regularly asks for certain books or publications that have appeared in Iran, which shows that he follows cultural events. When he received an invitation from the Armenian Prelacy in 2002, he immediately accepted it and came to Iran. Over a two-month stay, he conducted two theatre workshops in Tehran and in each trained about twenty-five Armenian students that were interested in theatre. In addition to physical movements and theatrical exercises, he also led several play readings with stage action and gave three public lectures on theatre and film. The positive impact of these workshops was quite palpable in the works that his students mounted after classes ended. He also participated in a session at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Tehran University and fielded student questions about the state of theatre before the Revolution.

**Several of his articles have been published. Please describe these as well as his three books on Armenian dramatic literature.**

He wrote a series of articles in the arts and literature section of *Haratch*/Forward while it was published in Paris, and also provided valuable analyses about current cultural affairs around the world, such as his substantive obituaries on the passing of John Cage[23] and Grotowski.[24] One should also mention his three-volume *One Act*, a compilation of the oldest and the latest one- act plays by Armenians (a total of forty plays). This is a very thorough research study, duly annotated along with footnotes, and has thus provided a highly authoritative academic source of reference for those interested in Armenian dramatic literature.

**What do you think would happen if Arby Ovanessian were eliminated from the history of Iranian theatre?**

Our theatre would be impoverished without him. He played a major role in cultivating and advancing the cultural level of Iranian society in the past by teaching at the NITV School of Film and Television, helping create the Theatre Workshop, City Theatre, and Crossroads Theatre, and most importantly, by staging high quality productions. He also contributed to introducing Iranian theatre to other countries and presented numerous works in festivals

[22] See Further Reading/AO: Selected publications, "Levon Shanth-e yev ir taterakan mdadzoghoutyoun-e".

[23] Ibid., "0'00 — Zero ropeh, zeo varkyan".

[24] Ibid., "Jerzy Grotowski, aghkadik tatronits minchev anyerevouyt tatron".

abroad. I am sure he has opened myriad windows to the arts for many young people, the very same who are now creating their own works in far-flung corners of the world. What's more, his learning is not confined to theatre; he is also very knowledgeable about literature and artistic, philosophical, social, and cultural matters, which is one of the most essential traits of an artist in the true sense of the word. To eliminate Arby is to erase a significant segment of the history of contemporary Iranian culture, which can only benefit those who harbor ill-will toward this land.

## Reza Ghassemi — *Writer, musician, director*

Paris, summer 2007

**Ovanessian let you work with his group on the play that you submitted to the competition. How did that happen?**

In 1973, I submitted *Undated Letters between My Family and Me and Vice Versa* to the play-writing competition launched by TW. A lot of people wanted to work with Arby or join his group, but he had declined. To me he said, "There is one condition: we'll let you work with the group for fifteen days, then we'll see your work and if it is promising, you can continue." And so, I continued.

**Why do you think he cooperated?**

One of his brilliant qualities was his openness to the discovery and blossoming of talent. It shows how exigent he is about theatre.

**How was your relationship with the actors?**

Fantastic, and in totally professional and ideal conditions. They did whatever I asked without hesitation.

**Why did you ask Ovanessian to do the set design for your work?**

Because I had seen his extraordinary designs. He told me he never designs sets for his own works in advance.

**What mindset did you have in common?**

For me, the fact that he never started a project with a preconceived design was ideal. Whatever emerged in improvisations that was right we nurtured and worked on. I had thought of using a number of screens to separate the scenes; he said it would be best to use lighting to form the scenes, so they can be interconnected and separated via light.

After a few rehearsals I realized we weren't making progress; his silent presence weighed heavy.

**Why?**

His extensive experience stressed me out. Although his presence as a set designer was necessary, I also sensed the gaze of an observer in whose presence I did not feel completely free. So, I discussed the issue with him. I asked him to not attend the rehearsals for a while. When he returned, he was happy with our progress.

**What are some of his recommendations that you remember?**

In one scene, one of the characters lay asleep on the bed. Arby said there's no need to remove the bed, let's leave it where it is; it's better for the scenes to mesh so that illusion and reality intertwine. It was a brilliant idea. We even kept the luggage onstage. The scenes had intertwined. For instance, while the father is talking to the mother in the room upstage their daughter lies on a bed downstage, as if a corpse were there all that time. Or in another scene where we had planned to shine the spotlight on a headless chicken flapping its wings; I asked the TW caretaker to cut off the chicken's head and hurl it centerstage. Arby told me not to because, he said, the stage has an intensity; such an action may not feel as intense in a film, but it will feel a hundred times more intense onstage and will really disturb the audience. Also, blood may splatter on the spectators as the chicken flaps its wings. He said it's enough to lay the chicken's head on the floor and as the light comes up, scatter some feathers in the air and let them drift down; this will accomplish what you're after.

**What characteristics distinguish him from other directors in your view?**

His greatest advantage was that in every play he searched for a new path and for the production opportunities that the text offered him. His perennial question was, what is theatre? In every production he tried to find a fresh answer. There were others at TW whose works were also novel, but I'd never seen this much probing in anyone else. He let the play speak to him, and that's how he knew where and how he could use those texts. I saw *Research*/Pazhuheshi at Downstage.[25] I never thought it possible to produce such a work out of that text. Most directors impose their own ideas on the pay. In those days, they would even draw the mise en scène on paper and direct the actors. Or the director would act out what he had in mind. He didn't do that. He just set up the conditions, then made his choice from among the improvisations.

**Other TW directors shared the same characteristics that you mention; they also sought the same goal, which was born out of an experimental and modern outlook on theatre. How would you measure Arby Ovanessian in that respect?**

He taught in an indirect way. It was by watching his productions that we learned how things could be done differently; we waited to see what his next work would be like, certain that it would be different. Others at TW were not as successful as he was in all their productions.

Unlike other directors of that era, he did not agonize over politics; he was preoccupied with cre-

[25] *Research*/Pazhuheshi had premiered at the Shiraz Arts Festival in Sep. 1968 before the founding of TW. In 1970, prior to traveling to the Royan Festival, we performed it once at Downstage/IAS for members of TW and Peter Brook and Anthony Page, and conducted two rehearsals at TW.

ation and existence and searched for answers to those questions in his work.

**Would it be correct to say his theatre is effectively human-centered?**

Exactly. In his perspective on art, he was after essential questions. He spent all his salary on books and contemporary music, or to travel. He was extremely educated and unlike some directors, would not copy works that he saw. He staged two plays by Peter Handke in Iran at a time when they had not yet been produced in France or England.

**What is your position vis-à-vis people who labeled him a formalist?**

Those views were expressed by people who wouldn't go to see his works, or if they did, belittled them. These same former critics and contrarians mimicked his method, though because they lacked his background and merely tried to do the same things, the mimicry was absurd and ridiculous. Later, they came to appreciate his stature and accomplishments.

They held form and content to be fundamentally distinct; he extricated the production from the play itself. For instance, when he decided to work on five plays by Beckett, he would say, "It's best to follow Beckett's stage directions exactly." He himself being the designer, in one of them he used a series of overhangs like Alexander Calder's mobiles. All the paraphernalia that the character dealt with in the play hung from a series of interconnected wires. Each object that the character needed during the play dangled from a point of that structure. If he wanted to pick up the scissors from the floor, for instance, the other side of the mobile would lift. This choice had created a space that communicated the play's inner and hidden meaning. He was very creative; he tried to render the ideas that are hidden in plays theatrical.

**The actors who left CPG early on believed that acting lacked vitality in his works. What do you think?**

I don't believe that at all. I believe the reason those actors left the group is that their ambitions wouldn't let them be content with just being good actors. In fact, one of the best performances I saw with some of these same actors was *The Cherry Orchard*.

**They believed he had more faith in design than in acting. Their criticism was based on the actor being positioned onstage like an object, and the general atmosphere that the director was after.**

It's natural for an actor to think only about his/her own self and see only themselves. But for a director, what's important is the whole. When August Rodin unveils his statue of Balzac, his friend says, "O my God, what beautiful hands!" Rodin cuts off the hands with an axe and says, "You were right; his beautiful hands stop one from appreciating the beauty of the whole."

On reading *Self-Accusation,* for instance, you ask yourself how is it possible to stage a text that's not theatrical at all? For the early presentations, Arby had selected four people. One was a woman who plucked a chicken from the very start and continued plucking to end; one of the men constantly cut up foil paper with a pair of scissors and made them into a series of shapes. The second man screwed electric bulbs on a square board one by one, which lit up by turn.

The third wrote the letter B on a plexiglass wall with a brush, one after another. That had to be done at the start to develop the work for nothing else could be extracted from that text. [26]

Although the text is anti-theatre, the production ultimately does have an impact. In any event, it's really difficult to pass an overall judgment on his working method with actors.

**In his productions, was life colorless?**

No, that's not true. He applied much effort and research to determine the right way to stage and articulate his works. As a rule, people of character don't let their work be too showy and prefer that a lot of things remain in the dark and come to light over time.

**What sort of experiences did you achieve from your collaboration?**

I learned from him that one needs to believe in oneself and search within. But for such a deep and exact search, one needs to study a lot and try seriously hard. In my view, no-one in Iran has devoted himself to theatre as passionately as he has.

**What genre of theatre did he seek in his work?**

Sometime after I had staged my play, I asked him what it was that he had liked about the text that made him agree that I stage it with his group. He said, "because it's very Eastern; the relationships are indirect, and everything is expressed indirectly. The dialogues are few and at the same time compact and allow the information inside them to flow out with more force." I had written my play intuitively; after hearing his comments I realized that he is after a genre of Eastern and Iranian theatre. And when later we talked about his most recent trip to Iran, he said they asked him at Tehran University whether he considered Abbas Nalbandian to be the most Iranian playwright in Iran, and he had said yes.

I believe one of the objects of his quest was to find a genre of theatre of his own. He was in search of a theatre that was Iranian.

**Grotowski's theatre is said to be like poetry, which is impossible to define in detail because it's open to many interpretations. Does that apply to Arby Ovanessian's work as well?**

Arby had mystical leanings of sorts. George Gurdjieff's[27] thinking — a search for a different existential order — greatly influenced the methods and the worldview of Brook, Grotowski, and Arby though it wasn't visibly evident in their work. Arby mined the potentialities of a work that made him alive; it was his personal aspirations that allowed him to recognize those potentialities. But I can't point out exactly what, because the plays that he staged are very different.

[26] See Theatre III, *Self-Accusation*.

[27] Founder of a movement whose teachings center on achieving enlightenment through self-development and self-awareness.

**What criteria were used in selecting plays that made them so varied?**

The common denominator in these plays is perhaps the kind of metaphysics that is found in the writings of Strindberg, Nalbandian, and Pirandello. Arby was a disciple of Jung and did not negate the metaphysical realm. For him, no event was devoid of meaning or without reason, and each harbored a message; that was apparent in his work as well. I remember he had traveled to Poland out of curiosity to watch Grotowski's latest practices that were taking place in the woods and described them to me very excitedly over three hours. From our conversations, I inferred his perception of coincidences and happenings to be that every such instance holds a message. It's impossible for that not to have influenced his work.

**Were you present at Ovanessian's rehearsals?**

Never, because he didn't allow outsiders to be at his rehearsals. Except one time he told me he was starting a new work with his actors and asked me to be present and play an instrument.

**Which work?**

He was planning a series of experiments with his actors and was looking for a kind of Iranian work. Unlike his previous exercises that went from morning till night, these went from night till morning. In them, he was after something new to happen in the group. But after traveling to South America to present *Caligula*, he disbanded his group at TW.

**Did TW receive as much financial support from the state as the [Ministry of Arts and Culture's] Theatre Department?**

To be very clear, No. These reports stem from something else, from people's pettiness. The Department of Theatre received a lot more support. Most of its well-known actors and directors — some of whom are my old friends — received interest-free loans and other benefits from the ministry; no such luck at TW.

Bijan Saffari who was an arts expert and TW's artistic director never said any part of the work had to be cut or modified. None of TW's works were within the purvey of the Ministry's Censorship Bureau known as the Department of Publications. In those days it wasn't as if there was total freedom and you could do whatever you wanted.

**Was the support of NITV Director Reza Ghotbi — who had oversight of TW — the reason someone like Ovanessian who was affiliated with TW was labeled a state-stooge?**

Ghotbi was one of the qualified executives in that era and because of his family connection to Farah was naturally in contact with the Shah as well. Someone like Arby had nothing to do with the state apparatus. State-stooge is a label that leftists used at will in those days; in fact, all theatres were public and subsidized by the state.

Other theatre companies' definition of theatre was a stale and derivative Soviet style social realism that appealed to general audiences. But that theatre was in fact a dead theatre. Nothing was taken at face value; everything was interpreted through the prism of politics. For

instance, I was told 'where you cut off the chicken's head, you were referring to women being suppressed and sacrificed' (*laughs*).

In those days, there was a big difference in work environment and worldview between TW and other theatre companies, both in terms of modes of production and their take on reality.

## Fozieh Majd — *Composer*

Tehran, autumn 2008

### *A Knight*/Savāri[28]

The tenth Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis, hosted numerous and varied programs. Several Iranian plays were performed, including a work by Arby Ovanessian named, *There Appeared a Knight with a Red Face, Red Hair, Red Lips, Red Teeth, a Red Robe, a Red Horse, a Red Spear . . .* This is not an invented title; it's from the Lesser/Khordeh Avesta . . .

This essay is about the musical element of that production.

Not everyone is up to the task of writing about Arby Ovanessian and his work; nor am I. All I know is that due to his absence in Iran these past years, a great leap in theatre came to a halt. The truth is a link in time to theatre was lost. All the signs and indicators of a new school could be seen in his work, with a unique style and perspective. People that have followed and understand the details of his work from every angle should now talk and write about it.

From my point of view, I would like to use the term structure or composition — as I understand it — to describe his works — those that I have seen — because they have a structural similarity to music, a contrapuntal texture, lines that merge and yet are independent. Notes that vary in pitch but emerge from a distinct base. Like a scale, different tempos, at times very fast and at times slow, with complex rhythms; melodies with ravishing colors and qualities, more like a monumental painting. The work of an artist who knows the language of colors and has a particular scheme for selecting them. And the work as a whole resonating with a contemporary harmony that has to be heard over and over before one can know its secrets. Secrets and mysteries. Secrets and mysteries behind every movement, hidden secrets behind a form, behind a word, a history, or whatever else. Rituals. Myths.

It may be possible to get somewhat closer to Arby's thinking and his insight, now lost to us, with the help of books such as *In Search of the Miraculous* by P.D. Ouspensky. One chapter in this book deals with the theory of the birth of the universe, explained in musical notations such as scale, notes and octave. With an awareness and knowledge of the variety of myths and symbols, the world of numbers and geometric shapes and similar phenomena, it may be possible to understand the parameters of his productions to some extent.

Back to *A Knight*/Savāri, Arby introduced this play as "a reflection on what can form the basis of an Iranian theatre"[29] and searched for such a base at a time when his track record in theatre was very highly regarded. Others before him had tried theatrical forms such as *ruhowzi* and

[28] See Theatre III, *A Knight*/Savāri, and *We Have Lost the Myth of Our Times*.
[29] "*A Knight*/Savāri Discussion." *Tamasha*, Shiraz Arts Festival daily bulletin, no. 11, 8 Sep. 1976.

*siah-bazi* for modern Iranian theatre, and yet others like Khojasteh Kia had suggested mysticism. Arby was likely after a synthesis or integration, a structure born of diverse elements that would dovetail with the contemporary, or more precisely, a timeless, language. More likely timeless, for the collective elements spanned from bygone days to today and beyond. With truths thought of as eternal. An enormous challenge. Thus, *A Knight*/Savāri was in essence a research effort and as such, very significant: also, it probably came to be his most difficult and least known work.

He started that research with the CPG about two years before the tenth Shiraz Arts Festival (1976), and in that context introduced to the group an Eastern play called *The Chained One,* whose theme intrigued those that were interested in participating. "Its theme was very actual, and we agreed that each of us would develop, at will, a scene or a fragment from the play that we felt we could supplant personally, and we began to collect additional material, reconstruct, and work on it. The way we worked was that we shared our themes with Ms. Tajadod who then either composed texts or provided existing literature in keeping with our needs. In the process, Ms. Tajadod redacted many scenes, sometimes in a theatrical form, meaning with dialogue, and sometimes as monologues, and handed them to us. Once the material was compiled, I also added a few pieces to those pieces, drawn from different sources, mostly from Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tair,* plus a piece that a friend of mine had written about one of his dreams. Once these pieces were assembled, they shaped the next step for developing the work. An initial connective thread was suggested by me, which was occasionally in contradiction with Ms. Tajadod's and the other actors' suggestions. In the process, some aspects of my concept were replaced by the actors' proposals and by other alternatives that we occasionally proposed; I also made some revisions."[30]

What were these texts? The lists that I have recovered are: Khordeh/Lesser Avesta, Sa'di's *Golestan*/Rose Garden, Rouzbehan Baqli Shirazi's *Shathiyat*/Ecstatic Utterances, Sheikh Shahab al-Din Sohravardi's collected works in Persian, the *Fihrist*/Index of Ibn Nadim, *Zohrat al-Haqayeq*/Revelation of Truth, Ain al-Quzat Hamedani's *Tamhidat*/Prolegomena, Manichean texts, the Old Testament, and Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tair*/Conference ('language') of the Birds, Arby explains the reason for using multiple sources as follows: "These constitute a people's culture, a mindset; we take bits of it and relate. Our goal in this work is to bring these bits together to see what communicates and what does not. We are not conducting academic research but are trying to create a play out of an Iranian mindset; that is why these sources have been used as they have the deepest roots in Iranian culture."[31]

So, it's about accessing the Iranian mindset through writings from bygone periods that may be thought of as the ancestors of our times. In the same meeting to discuss *A Knight*/Savāri, he further elaborates on his method: "Several experiments have been run with these pieces; the scope of the experiment is to find out what will surface among us."

Some texts are improvisational, others thoroughly rehearsed:

"The scenes have been selected with the provision that the diverse elements have a focal point and that they integrate and align a whole that sprouts from a particular part of the mind; this part of the mind that has to make a connection is related to intelligence not to the intellect. Some scenes are more successful, others less, which is all we were aiming for; we weren't

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

planning to stage a whole play, finished and polished, because that itself would have eliminated the possibility of the next discovery, which would occur in an exchange with the audience."[32]

Three words have been used here, mind, intellect, and intelligence, and their separate functions.[33] So much for Arby's general discussions, who brings up and poses fundamental questions. Explanations in the same August 29 interview in Shiraz by the text's author, Mahin Tajadod, clarify the role of the writer in this project: "It was decided to first of all write texts to communicate the concepts in question, and secondly, to identify Persian, Arabic, and Manichaean texts that conveyed these concepts. To describe light escaping from darkness when that was the subject, I wouldn't write an original piece; in such instances the texts would be used, as for example when we wanted to express the conflict between the forces of good and evil. When communicating a concept came up short from my linguistic standpoint, I did not try to reinvent it; I would use an existing text that entailed the concept. That is how a phrase, a term, might become embedded in the play. This does not mean that we strung together a piece from Sa'di for instance and a piece from Sohravardi. We borrowed from texts wherever necessary and we tried very hard to respect style and usage and rhythmic balance; I'm willing to give a prize to anyone who can identify which of these words and phrases are ours and which are others'". And Arby has described the final form as follows: "There is no narrative logic in a standard sense; the goal is to connect to the mind of the spectators via a certain worldview with the help of words, movement, stillness, sound, poetry, and old and new texts."[34]

With that preamble, we can now turn to the music. For this writer, the story of *A Knight*/ Savāri began in May 1976 when Arby talked to me about it and told me he planned to present it at the tenth Shiraz Arts Festival. After a brief explanation of the main idea behind the work it was agreed that he would show me the texts once they were ready.

About a couple of months after Arby first mentioned that play, the texts were shown. From among them, three immediately hit a chord. First, a relatively long text from the Lesser Avesta, and two from Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tair*. I picked these three for the music. The Avestan text itself is problematic. I've inserted a title above the typed copy that I now have in hand:

"King Fereidun's Enchantment," the text is in Persian; Mahin Tajadod copied it down in her personal style; it begins with *besmellah* [Arabic, *In the name of God*] and continues with several Avestan words that are repeated: *fraha, fravisvacha, fracha*; then the text of the spell begins in Persian: "In the Name of God and by Command of God" and "In the Name of Fereidun, the Cow-Nursed."

From here on, a "wind" is addressed: "Foul Wind, be gone! Evil Wind, be gone!," and so on, and the next step, "yoking" the "wind": "I yoke the black-eyed one, I yoke the white-eyed one," and so on; this section goes on in the same vain for a while until in the end, "There appeared a knight with a red face, red hair, red lips, red teeth, a red gown, a red horse, a red spear . . ." It's a hideous wind. Now the Wind introduces itself: "I'm the red wind, the white wind, the wolf wind…" and so on. "I lodge my wind inside people's bodies and I eat their flesh and smash their bones." Incantations to fully exorcize the wind are chanted and the text ends with repeated recitals of "Bé Haqq!" [*Haqq*, an epithet of God; Arabic, *truth, justice*]. Essentially an Avestan text with Islamic allusions. Incredible. An extremely dramatic text. A spell buster,

[32] Ibid.

[33] These concepts are fundamental to Hindu schools of thought. FM

[34] Jamshid Gorgin, "A Conversation with Arby Ovanessian." *Rastakhiz*, no. 11, 2 Sep. 1976.

magical incantations, and within the orb of musical thinking.

With such a text, I knew that a common and familiar musical form had to be avoided. I couldn't imagine one or more instruments playing background music or some sort of music in commiseration with the text as a few people uttered the words. The idea that most intrigued my mind was how to reproduce the Avestan sounds of the text itself. I outlined a structure. In those parts where the text was in Persian, I felt it appropriate for Persian words to be articulated with specific rhythms. The text became audio material. Three actors formed a chorus. The linear movement of the words was dispensed with and the polyphony of sounds became central. In regards words, the harmonic pattern of the letters was opted for; letters were layered on top of one another. Vowels or silent letters in each word would mix through measured rhythms. The durations were clearly denoted. Overall, they sounded to me like ancient, faraway, quasi-Avestan sounds.

The next question was the performance of such a composition by actors that were not musicians. The score constituted musical rhythms, melodies, and singing in unison. The durations and rhythms had to be performed in accordance with the principles of music; the melody had to be sung at times; at times they started and ended together.

First thing, I wrote a score for my own use and one that could be used by the three actors. The music was divided into eighty-five parts comprising three voices. I could use my own score to describe the tempo, the beat, and the specific vocalization of the words. Most importantly, for them to be able to follow the tempo and the counting.

A while later, rehearsals began at Bagh-e Ferdows. Three actors, Ferdows Kaviani, Sussan Taslimi, and Sadreddin Zahed had a short learning curve. They got the rhythms, they counted, they kept the tempos, and they sang. I don't think musicians could have found it as easy to perform such a score, especially because they are generally not as strong in the dramatic and theatrical domains. The actors were able to grasp and deliver the theatrical features of these incantations in full dramatic form, from hollering and howling to echoing the strains of the "Pestilent Wind" according to the work's polyphonic structure. They were brilliant.

The issue is 'wind' in the Lesser Avesta and its relationship to the wind in Zar o Noban on the shores of the Persian Gulf and the wind in *guat* in Baluchestan. It may be hard to believe that the thought process that drew me to this text and took me back to times long past never registered that I had in fact witnessed such a state. I had met Baba Darvish and Mama Hanifeh on a trip to Qeshm toward the end of 1972, and heard the Zar Father and the Zar Mother, and those chants and vocal structures had been performed at the Arts Festival in Shiraz in the summer of 1973. On a following trip to Baluchestan, I had also come to know the "Winds" of that region and simultaneously with *A Knight*/Savāri, had scheduled *guati* music at the tenth Arts Festival. The music of Zār o Noban and *guati* music are both lyrical with flowing and characteristic melodies, and in the case of invocations chanted for Abd ul-Qader Gilani in Baluchestan, I had observed, in some performances, attaining a state of trance and communion through music. But what precipitated in my mind in relation to this Avestan text was a different world: neither melodic, nor lyrical, but a transcendent state, perhaps even historical, with ancient and archaic vocal characteristics and dimensions — what sounded ancient in my imagination — but at the same time, they were sounds that swelled from psychic pulses. That was the state I engaged with. I believe what has taken shape in the musical composition of "King Fereidun's Enchantment" is largely a visceral insight that has connected to the present world and the music of our times via the subconscious and its vibrations.

Another story that should be mentioned in this context is the song I had heard at Naghsh-e Rostam in the moments when the darkness of night was joining the light of day.

*Orghast II* was an experiment in search of an international theatre language. That play used several ancient languages and a new one that the English poet Ted Hughes had invented at Peter Brook's request.[35] September 1971, invited guests and the audience had to be at Naqsh-e Rostam early in the morning, before sunrise. We arrived at Naqsh-e Rostam in special buses. It was nighttime and dark; part of the performance was staged at the tombs. When it was over, the crowd gradually scattered, and we wandered about that wide expanse in silence awaiting what was to come next.

Arby Ovanessian was among us. Little by little, the darkness of the night lifted. We were at the fire temple and walking in the dark like the rest, like shadows, slowly, and soundlessly. All of a sudden, a noise stopped me dead in my tracks. It was a woman's voice, clear and cutting, that beamed across that enormous space through multiple loudspeakers. It sounded somewhat close to vocal experiments in contemporary music of the times. At times it hit very high frequencies and at time very low, with whole notes and words that were unfamiliar to me. For a moment, I thought it might be Cathy Berberian. Maybe she's performing a work by Luciano Berio, but that couldn't be because it breached history and familiar musical norms. Random sounds that were sung with astonishing strength. Uncharted. Dramatic, and yet novel. It had neither the peace and tranquility of Buddhist chants nor the melodic canticles of church music, nor was it modern in any recognizable way. I couldn't keep quiet and softly asked Arby. Answer: It's Mahin, the 'Cock's Call at Dawn.' What a surprise! Unbelievable! Those vocal vibrations with such astounding technique were the crowing of a cock from beyond that welcomed and glorified the waking of the sun.

On the way back, we all climbed on the same bus and sat next to Mahin Tajadod. Mahin Tajadod was not familiar with musical techniques, at least not enough to be able to produce such sounds. She was not a singer, while the chant that I heard, those whole notes at an even weight, like a wind instrument, those jumps between high and low, the force of the performance, could not have been easy to achieve even by a professional vocalist, because the difference between the lowest and the highest notes was higher than the natural voice of a singer. Mahin Tajadod explained that it was an experimentation on Avestan sounds. In her view, the sounds that were uttered in the incantations sprang from cavities in the stomach; she had discovered these cavities and to prove her point, performed the incantations herself. That work by Mahin Tajadod led to her being invited to respected forums abroad. In Iran, like numerous other experiments, her work was unfortunately met with skepticism and scorn at the time. Even though the scientific and historical aspects of this phenomenon might have been questioned, discussed, and criticized, one could not ignore its practical and creative features. For me, that work had an inspirational and intuitive character and I valued it.

That chant was first heard in 1971; five years later, Mahin Tajadod had an idea for a text found in the Lesser Avesta for *A Knight*/Savāri, namely, "King Fereidun's Enchantment". There was no similarity between her vocal sounds and my composition in this play. But no doubt Mahin Tajadod's experiment had helped liberate my imagination. For Mahin Tajadod the text of "King Fereidun's Enchantment" was too good to be adulterated with musical vibrations and rhythms. She said, "I think it's the most theatrical piece; it has a monologue, and sometimes

[35] Avestan, Classical Greek, and Latin, plus *Orghast*, the language invented by Ted Hughes. FM

dialogue. Of course, it's never been used before and it has been my honor to discover it."

The other text was "The Candle and the Butterfly" from Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tair*, for which I conceived a scheme where the words were broken up and arranged it for the speakers as simple formulas accompanied by single notes on the *santur*. That text was readied and recorded after a few rehearsals and played back in one of the scenes. Two years later in 1978, *A Knight*/Savāri was performed at Crossroads Theatre. For those performances, I composed a different work based on "The Candle and the Butterfly" titled "One Night" for one soprano, one alto, and seven complementary vocals. I also prepared a few short pieces that I selected from the music I had collected in Khorasan; for those, together with a few recording effects created by the sound technician, we composed a piece inspired by the story of Simorgh in *Mantiq ut-Tair*. Arby used several of those in some scenes.

Before writing this essay, I read the reports that had been published in newspapers about *A Knight*/Savāri, including conversations with Arby. I realize that his search for what makes a play Iranian had not piqued my mind that much at the time. But now, I keep thinking about it. Perhaps the time has come for him to recount and explain the history of his work and related activities and share his thoughts with the young generation today. I hope he will do that, or write, or talk about it. His work in theatre was prolific, productive, creative, and singular. And it wasn't meant to stand out only in Iran; it had things to say and to present at the international level; he ranked among the leading, acclaimed figures in theatre. Indeed, every one of Arby's staged works was a highly noteworthy event that many considered significant and exceptional. Of course, there were also those that attacked and criticized his innovative and individual style, but many more took pride in his presence on the theatre stage in Iran, and in his personality, and still do. Including the author of these pages.

## Edward Arshamian — *Industrial and graphic designer, actor*

Stockholm, 2009

### *A Glance*

I believe I'm the only person that has been a friend, relative, and classmate of Arby Ovanessian with the same mother tongue, throughout his life — meaning from his childhood in 1945 until now — and above all, his earliest collaborator in theatre. Therefore, I thought it best to keep the periods from childhood to the present in a chronological order in this essay so as to provide a more complete portrait of him.

I got to know him in kindergarten; we're both Pisces and the same age. Our principle had made several trips to Scandinavian countries and gained a lot of knowledge about child development, so her educational method was different and modern by comparison with other kindergartens.

In primary and high school, Arby drew graphic strips that were published in a children's magazine called *Illuminator*/Loosaber. He also put on plays at home, and in the summers, puppet theatre for the neighborhood kids. He made the sets and the puppets himself. Initially, the puppets were two-dimensional and made of cardboard, but little by little, he refined them by using fabric and other materials. In the last year of high school, we decided to form a theatre group with several school mates, including Arby. Harpik Tamrazian, an Ararat Club council

member, was a poet who knew Shahin Sarkissian. He suggested inviting Shahin to be the artistic leader of our group. He accepted, and the group was named Armen.

At our first session, he asked each of us what role would you like to play in the group. Everyone was interested in acting but when it was Arby's turn, he said he wanted to paint the sets. In the beginning he used to sit quietly in a corner and sketch. During one rehearsal, Shahin walked by him, saw the sketch, and exclaimed: "We've got the set!" Thus, Arby became the group's set designer. Starting in 1960, we performed several plays under Sarkissian's direction for the next two and a half years.

The second period of the Armen Group begins with Arby's return from England. At the time, Shahin was in rehearsal with *The Blue Outlet* and didn't have time to work with us; he asked Arby to direct a play with us. Arby chose *The Respectable Beggars* and we started to rehearse. When Sarkissian passed away, Arby staged *The Blue Outlet* in his honor at the actors' request, and in his name. After that, we decided to perform *The Respectable Beggars* at IAS. Thus, for the first time, a play was produced in Armenian outside the confines of our clubs, and audiences other than Armenian minorities were also able to see it.

*The Respectable Beggars* is a social satire written in Ottoman Turkey. Arby transferred the original novel in its entirety to the stage and was able to give form to its theatrical potential. I consider that to be one of his most important and intriguing works. In that production, many standard theatrical conventions were abandoned for the first time. The acting swung as it were between graphic novels, Theatre of the Grotesque, and animated films.

His directing method was very different from Sarkissian's. Shahin used to start with a roundtable play reading. We would sit around a table and read the play for weeks until the characters fell into place, so to speak, then he would start blocking. Shahin used to pre-determine the actors' every move and position based on Arby's set design. When Arby started working with us as a director, he set all that aside. Roundtable play readings stopped; blocking was not assigned in advance. We acted out words and movements freely onstage. His method was to let us discover the character and the voice physically and conceptually. Sarkissian worked within a preconceived framework while Arby was intent on the moment and the present, using the actor's sense of comfort as his yardstick. The production would find a distinct rhythm suited to the plot, the characters, and the spirit of the play. The set designs that he created for Sarkissian were different from those he created for his own productions. In his own work, the set was detached and mobile, which is why every scenery could be easily transformed into a new environment.

When Arby returned to Iran after his film studies in London, I was a student at the Faculty of Decorative Arts in Tehran. Together with fellow students who were interested in the evolution of art in Iran, we asked him to develop courses and teach us filmmaking and animation. These courses led to a point where I became his assistant during the making of the documentary film, *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus* (on The Black Church/*Qara Kelissa*), and Mohammad Reza Aslani made his first documentary for Fereydoun Rahnema at NITV. Khojasteh Kia who knew Arby from Sarkissian's times had seen *The Respectable Beggars* with Fereydoun Rahnema and highly admired its creativity and originality; they invited him to join the jury of the First Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition. It's in that assembly that Arby discovered Abbas Nalbandian's *Research*/Pazhuheshi, and following its production, TW was founded and Bijan Saffari — who was my professor at the Faculty of Decorative Arts — became its director.

I was also cast in *On the Way*, which Arby directed. The entire production was designed in

white. On a white backdrop upstage, corpses evoking the first Armenian Genocide under Sultan Hamid in 1896 were drawn in charcoal. I had the lead role: a young, patriotic revolutionary who sacrifices his love in favor of his political goals and his people's aspirations for emancipation. He abandons his beloved and joins the fighters, which ends in his beloved committing suicide in the final act.

At TW, I designed the posters for *Self-Accusation*, *My Foot My Tutor*, and *Beckett 5*, as well as for *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, his feature film. There, too, I had complete freedom; he would not interfere. Then I left for France to study industrial design. When I returned, he was working on the construction plans for Crossroads Theatre. On his recommendation, I designed the signage that was cast in metal and installed above the stairwell at the theatre's entrance; my design was reproduced in brochures and books as well. He also asked me to design the furniture and portable, modular seating platforms. The platforms could be folded and stacked away in a small storage space. With these platforms, they could reconfigure the audience seating area to suit each production.

To better understand his approach to theatre, I'll note five productions from different periods in which I did not play a part as an example:

*Hedda Gabler*, which I saw at IAS in English where he also designed the set and costumes and where I noticed elements I had never seen on a stage before. The character of *Hedda Gabler* is complex and intriguing. She's called the female Hamlet. She is constantly at war with herself, with everyone else, with patriarchal customs, and generally with women's role in society, and ultimately finds suicide to be the only solution. Arby had chosen dark tones for the set; most important of all was *Hedda Gabler's* dress, which was ankle length, with a high neckline and long sleeves in the plain style of Scandinavian women's attire, in dark purple. She made her first entrance in that dress. After the intermission, the dress was identical but a little darker. Arby had designed two identical dresses, the second one in a darker shade to let the audience see through Hedda Gabler's inner gloom.[36] A goat skin lay centerstage on which she stepped or paused every time she uttered a biting and bitter word, as if to intimate an ancient rite and an imminent sacrifice.

I saw *Vīs o Ramin* at the Shiraz Arts Festival; it was a ritualistic theatre that unfolded in the ruins of Persepolis. The site with its ancient columns, the earth, and the sky, became parts of the play. The performance started at sunset and ended in darkness when the sun disappeared. The time, space, and the setting were nature itself and free of artificial scenery; the performance was exquisite and touching.

*All at Once*/Nagahan — I saw it at the Nancy International Festival in France. He had raised a very high wall in the middle of the gymnasium. At the time, I was a student at the *École* des *Arts Décoratifs* in Paris. Peter Brook had come to see the performance with his ICTR actors from Paris the same evening. They all praised the power of the production and its strong impact, even on people who didn't speak Persian.

*The Lady with A Little Dog* in Armenian was extraordinarily beautiful and captivating and conveyed the simplicity and transparency of Chekhov's world effortlessly. The performance didn't follow a standard format. It was staged in the center of the hall with the audience seated on three sides. The space was open and except for a few chairs, the stage was empty. Hundreds

[36] It was in fact the same velvet dress, but the lighting was designed to make it appear darker. AO

of white paper birds hung from the ceiling and evoked the flight of seagulls in the fog at dusk by the sea.[37] He produced the same play the following year in Paris with renowned actors Paloma Matta and Sacha Pitoëff, which I did not see.[38]

*The Marvellous Ones* is the last work of his that I have seen. It was performed in Paris in western Armenian with the performance space set behind the wall of a church altar. This work has left a very powerful, magical, and poetic impression in my memory. The story is about a young hunchback that slaves away at a watermill and is constantly mocked and humiliated by the owner. The lad sleeps among the sacks of flour at the watermill. Fairies visit in the middle of the night and treat him to a feast full of fun and joy. One night the fairies lift the hump off the youth's back, fill it with gold — which he gets to keep — and take away his hump. When the owner finds out, he decides he will sleep in the watermill the following night all by himself so that he alone may enjoy the nighttime feast. At the banquet the next night, the fairies repay the owner for his cruelty and avarice — he asks for twice as much gold as the lad — by doubling the size of the lad's hump and sticking it on the owner's back.

What moved me in that production was the mood that Arby had infused into that space using silence, chimes, light, and color. In utter simplicity, upon the fairies' entrance in silence and the chime of a small bell, a magical aura would fill the space that mesmerized the viewer.

His special skill in directing has always fascinated me. By paring down, minimizing, and polishing every component of the production — speech, sound, lighting, décor, and props — he connects directly to the audience's subconscious. In particular, he understands the pulse of every play and by creating a rhythm and tone that's in keeping with it, produces an eloquent movement onstage. I haven't seen such skill and mastery in anyone else. This style is special to him — effortlessly reaching the audience's subconscious by simplifying and stripping down the elements.

One of the criticisms directed at him was that his working method was dictatorial; it was said that he imposed his views on the cast. His relationship with our group was not like that at all. Quite the contrary, he left us very free. He's very genuine, honest, and transparent, transparent in words, transparent in creativity, and transparent in behavior.

As a rule, the Persian language camouflages meanings and ordinarily, a word that is spoken doesn't express what it wants to say internally. Speech is generally not direct but wrapped in innuendo. He didn't want to use such a language in theatre and film. He addressed issues directly, candidly, sincerely, and transparently, but by habit, some people interpreted that to be a cover, and that dichotomy often led to misunderstandings because a person who speaks in innuendos and a veiled tongue is incapable of appreciating transparency and frankness; words reach their ears with a double meaning; they are not received directly and are interpreted divergently so that a gap constantly forms between what is said and what is in fact meant. Thus, it was difficult for some people to assimilate his work.

He always looks for simple and overt transparency in his treatment of the text, in directing the cast, and in design. His direction and set designs evolved over time, becoming simpler and more compact, and their visual and theatrical impact grew increasingly powerful.

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[37] Reviewed by Alireza Rezai, "Chekhov Shegeftangiz Ast." *Rastakhiz,* 4 Feb. 1998: 7; reprinted in Lashkari/*TC*: 889-891.

[38] On the Festival d'Automne production see Mathilde La Bardonnie, "Arby Ovanessian : ouvert sur le monde." *Le Monde*, 25 Oct. 1979: 22.

# Theatre
# II

# Actors[1]

## Parviz Pourhosseini — *Actor*

Tehran, winter 2005

**What was it like to work with Arby Ovanessian?**

He had an inquisitive mind and searched for new paths and forms of expression. He set up experimental environments for his actors and had instructors of body exercises, yoga . . . work with the group. Whatever question we had, wherever necessary, we did an exercise. Those exercises were a means of working on the self. The group was made up of young and inquisitive actors that having collaborated for several years and performed in several festivals at home and abroad had achieved a good harmony.

**What sort of conditions did he provide to help actors create their parts and to what extent did he rely on the actors' personal analyses, their freedom, and their choices, in the process?**

He guided the actors toward their roles indirectly and simulated the atmosphere for them. He set up conditions that guided them towards his own take on the play, which was very different. But I don't remember him using analysis and interpretation as was common.

**What was your role in *Orghast*?**

In the production at Persepolis, I was on top of the mountain and together with a Portuguese actor, I'd strike Prometheus vocally. A Naghsh-e Rostam, I was in the chorus. I was the only Iranian actor that started out at ICTR in Paris and after a few months returned to Iran together with the foreign group.[2] The Iranian actors that had been working with Arby also joined that group.

**How did Arby prepare and guide actors in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh to get results? How was that different from his work in theatre?**

After shooting *The Spring*/Cheshmeh was over and I was in London to work with Peter Brook, he advised me in a letter to watch Bresson's films. Bresson worked with amateurs; professional actors are rarely found in his works. Arby applied the same method in his film; he even asked professional actors not to act but to simply be themselves. He got rid of all their super-

[1] All interviews in this section were conducted by the author. Tr

[2] Brook chose Parviz Pourhosseini to work in Paris after watching *Research*/Pazhuheshi; see "Peter Brook in Tehran." *Tamasha,* 15 Apr. 1970: 8. On the collaboration between Brook and Iranian artists see "Goftegu-i dar Hashiyeh-ye Jashn ba Andrew Porter, Montaqed-e Financial Times." *Keyhan,* 1 Sep. 1971.

fluous and exaggerated moves so that what was left in the end was an acting that felt natural.

**Was the Stanislavski System, which was a mainstay in theatre, to his liking? What other acting methods did he use?**

He didn't reject Stanislavski but was particularly drawn to Vakhtangov,[3] one of Stanislavski's pupils.

**From *Research*/Pazhuheshi to *Caligula*, what aspects of his work helped strengthen you professionally?**

Foremost, the experimental nature of his work; it helped us mature. Secondly, his directing method, which helped us develop collectively; we learned from each other and nurtured the works together.

**How would you describe the experience of performing at a site such as Persepolis?**

To find alignment with the performance space at Persepolis is a very delicate affair. *Caligula* was performed in open air — expressly under the full moon — and we know that Caligula was in love with the moon. For an actor, that experience is inimitable.

**What was special about TW?**

As the TW brochure says, we were interested in doing experimental work that hadn't been tried before. We ignored the familiar and had to perform works that had a singularity and an uncommon perspective. The actors were already trained, but to identify and accumulate new experiences, they had to forget what they knew and face the work with a free mind. People succeed in experimental work who knowing the old ways, crave new and different approaches.

## Fahimeh Rastkar — *Actress*

Tehran, 2006

**What exercises were included in Ovanessian's program, and what were their characteristics?**

Our work at the TW lasted from 9 AM to 10 PM. We began with about an hour of body exercises, followed by voice and breathing practices. Once a text was selected for work, he led us through many improvisations. I believe those exercises boosted the actors' creativity and unlocked their potential. Standing side by side, even people who might have been strangers or not part of the same group tried to connect with one another.

[3] Vakhtangov reconciled diametric opposites, expressionism and realism. AO

**Was the program part of TW's practice or exclusive to his work?**

It was exclusive to his group. He devised different improvisations for his actors suitable for each circumstance.

**Were the improvisations tied to the play or were they pointers to help grasp the text and develop an atmosphere?**

They were related to the play anyway and couldn't be isolated from it.

We also performed special exercises before audiences; Arby would tell us where to start and what we would be doing. For instance, one night when working on *The Cherry Orchard,* we were told to put on our costumes and start playing scenes at random — I might start from Act 3 and someone else from Act 1. At the time of this exercise, work on the play was already complete and we were due to perform it at CT). Rehearsals had started at TW.

In another special exercise, we were to speak out only sentences that contained the words, "the cherry orchard"; each actor would recite sentences from the text at will.[4]

**The director did not interfere with the improvisations at all? The actors were free?**

We were free to improvise as we wished. Afterwards, he'd say which moments had been deeply grasped and felt alive. The only thing that mattered to him was the quality of the exercises and rehearsals. All the other plays that we worked on followed the same process.

**In your view, was his production of *The Cherry Orchard* a success?**

I think that work lost its impact when we performed it at CT. The hall had acoustical problems: the actors' voices couldn't reach the audience from certain positions on the stage; at times, they couldn't even hear each other properly. His choice of pace for *The Cherry Orchard* was very slow, and once onstage, the rhythm of our work slowed down even further. In my view, the slow pace tired the audience.

**Were any provisions put in place to resolve the acoustic problems at CT?**

He suggested placing a series of wooden screens onstage to improve the acoustics. But even reducing the size of the stage with screens didn't help.[5]

In design, he was peerless, taking even the minutest dimensions into account. His passion for work was supreme in moments when he chose objects and costumes and created designs; at such moments he was truly unequalled.

[4] See further, Janet Lazarian, "The Cherry Orchard: Three versions of a play." *Tehran Journal*, 7 Nov. 1972: 7.

[5] Three years later, in 1975, CT was closed for acoustic and other major upgrades; it reopened in 1977.

**What did you think of *The Cherry Orchard* at Bagh-e Ferdows as a new work in a non-performance space?**

He understood the value of the performance space very well. At Bagh-e Ferdows, we performed a special exercise where we could walk through the building. The scenes where the characters are looking out at the garden or going out to the fields worked especially well and were very interesting as the play unfolded.

**Would you rank him among experimentalists?**

There's no doubt that from the moment he began to work, it was his intention to experiment. He's done a lot of very good experimental work in Armenian as well. Those of us in the audience who didn't know Armenian could nevertheless appreciate the highly accomplished stage and costume design.

## Houshang Tavakkoli — *Actor*

Tehran, summer 2006

**Early on in Ovanessian's career, some actors disagreed with his outlook and method, including, as it turned out, one *Research*/Pazhuheshi cast member. Why?**

Some of the hostility was in fact ideological. Before *Research*/Pazhuheshi, social conflicts were kept under wraps, and there was no history of divergent opinions producing a shock effect. With that production, some theatre figures with leftist tendencies took a position against Arby and created a firestorm in the press.[6] The fact that a group of people protested something that was unfolding onstage was a priceless development. The ensuing discussion forums and the topics that got press coverage drove a big slice of people's attention toward theatre. The aesthetic elements of that production stood apart from others.

Another set of objections came from established theatre professionals confronted with the new wave; jealousy was also occasionally palpable. And because Ovanessian came to be considered one of the most successful TW directors, it was natural for him to become the target of the strongest attacks. That said, a large part of the opposition changed their views after the Revolution and that is the case today as well.

## Mahvash Afshar-Panah — *Actress*

Tehran, summer 2006

**What were the goals of the City Players Group, and what exercises did you follow to achieve them?**

[6] Writer and critic Nader Ebrahimi retracted his initial negative review of the production in a follow-up article, "Man Aqayed-e Manfi-ye Khod ra dar Mored-e Nemayeshnameh-ye Na'lbandian Pass-Migiram" (I withdraw my negative impressions of Nalbandian's play). *Ayandegan*, 17 Sep. 1968: 6.

The most important goal at TW was for group members to work in harmony. We did lots of exercises such as movement training, yoga, tai chi, and breathing exercises. If a play had only two actors, the rest of the group didn't stop exercising but continued without interruption. We exercised body movements with Gita Ostovani and did tai chi with Arby.

**What came after the exercises?**

We would start rehearsing a play after a set of specially designed exercises. Even on performance days, we did all the body, breathing, and voice exercises.

**What sort of employment benefits did TW offer the groups?**

Everyone received a monthly salary. Each group had their own rehearsal room and could always practice without a time limit.

**What sort of exercises shaped your first work, Samuel Beckett's *Come and Go* [7]? Do you remember any details and the set design?**

The sounds and the spaces of that production were based on our harmony in special exercises. Each of the five short plays was performed in a different section of the auditorium.

In *Come and Go,* we wore full-length dresses and large hats that shaded our eyes. The audience doesn't know what has come over the three women onstage; it's only when one goes offstage that they guess what's happened on seeing the other two characters' reaction. The two speak no more than a few words.

A lot of work was done on the actor's voice and on the kinds of sentiments that could be communicated through it, such as fear, anxiety, and the two characters' different states of mind.

**Please describe *Act Without Words I*, one of the five pieces in *Beckett 5*.[8]**

A mobile hung from the ceiling in that production. Several objects were installed on the mobile; pulling down one threw the other out of balance. The actor incessantly struggled with the mobile, which was constantly off-balance.

**Did the actors get personal training?**

Never. All our activities were done as a group. For instance, in the rehearsals for *All at Once*/ Nagahan, two or three of us rehearsed the same part simultaneously before one was assigned; I was selected.

I remember we presented *All at Once*/Nāgahan and *The Cherry Orchard* in special exercises before TW members. There were no specific boundaries in these exercises. The audience moved

[7] *Come and Go,* one of five short plays in *Beckett 5,* became part of the repertory in Jan. 1970.
[8] Reviewed by Jamshid Eramian, "Beckett 5." *Setareh-ye Cinema,* no. 56, 1970: 49-50.

along with us. We might have even chosen to omit parts of the text. These exercises helped us discover new things in our parts or even change it.

## Farideh Sepah-Mansour — *Actress*

Tehran, summer 2006

**What special exercises were done to help shape *The Cherry Orchard*?**

In the intervals between the rehearsals, we had analyzed the character of Charlotta in accordance with the Stanislavski System. When I hit a dead-end in delivering that role, the result that we achieved after a two-hour exercise was a fascinating story in and of itself.

Hardly any director was quite as knowledgeable about philosophy, psychology, and sociology as Ovanessian. He had great analytic skills and lots of answers for our questions. He knew the goal of his mises en scène, but he left his actors free to experiment as the work took shape.

An actor should be proficient enough to perform and deliver a play in an empty space.

**What body movements and exercises do you recall in connection with your role as Charlotta?**

I learned to vocalize all the words without moving my lips. Our abilities stemmed from the knowledge that we had gained. We prepared a hypothetical identity card for each role; there was even a discussion about Charlotta's fate and what would befall her.

**To what extent did the exercises depend on the actors? Were you free to choose them?**

After continuous exercises, only the essence of the work remained. We also conducted special exercises before audiences, most of whom were student members of TW interested in theatre. To give you an example, in one such exercise Arby told us: "Recite the first word in the play that comes to your mind". These improvisations generated spontaneous dialogues among the actors, and out of them all, a play would be born. That exercise brought the text to life for us. In the free recitations in that exercise, it was possible for one actor to choose a sentence from the beginning of the text and recite it in the middle of the play. Another actor who was in a different scene would respond to that dialogue. These sentences could be chosen from any scene so long as the dialogues complemented each other conceptually.

**Was the play altered in any way?**

Polishing the translation through play reading took no more than three or four days. Linguistic corrections were made but the text itself was not altered.[9]

[9] None of the plays were ever altered. During the exercises, the sequence or the structure of a play might have changed if it helped bring home a concept, but the final performance always followed the complete, original play. Here and there, the Persian translation might have required some tweaking to ensure effective and instant communication. AO

**One performance was given at Bagh-e Ferdows. Where in the building did the production start and how did it advance?**

The audience moved in step with the actors. We started the performance in a large room on the top floor of the building. Madame Ranevskaya made her entrance in that same room. The audience, carrying small cushions, sat down around the room or settled close by anywhere they wanted. In the second act — which was performed in open air — the audience also trailed out of the building into the garden. In Act 3, we went to the main hall on the ground floor — which is now the Cinema Museum screening room — for the banquet. Act 4 circled back to the first room. The performance was at 10 or 11 AM. There was no special lighting and the audience numbered forty or fifty maximum.

**Were the special exercises performed in costume?**

At Bagh-e Ferdows, we wore our everyday clothes. Costumes were for TW, and we had several dress rehearsals there.

**In *Man, Beast and Virtue*, did the characters resemble animals?**

Only in their movements. The actors had paid a visit to the zoo and adapted the animals' behavior to their roles. They made their entrance onstage in different ways: Razia the maidservant moved like a horse, the Captain walked in like a bear, and so forth.

**In *Little Eyolf*, what was the lighting and stage design like?**

On a stage dressed entirely in canary yellow, small, pastel-colored, satin cushions were scattered around; a rope rose like a pole in a corner between two wooden steps, and a plank thrust out from frontstage into the auditorium. I remember one of the actors[10] saying sarcastically, "What's that? A piece of wood and a couple of steps hoisted onstage . . ." After a while, when Arby's lighting design was in place and we took in the space from the back of the hall, the lights conjured a ship onstage with the rope as its mast, and the blue light that flooded the auditorium intimated the sea. It was as if a ship were floating in the water halfway across the audience hall.

**Based on your experience with other directors, in what way, specifically, was Ovanessian different?**

I never again met anyone who so attentively answered my stream of questions. He could spend hours exploring many settings to help me resolve one question. I must say, his speech was replete with metaphors and allegories. When he saw me in Dostoevsky's *White Nights,* which was directed by Iraj Anvar, his comment about the girl that I was playing was: "I don't see it that way; in my view this girl is like a lantern on fire; a lantern that is falling down but doesn't fall, that is melting but hasn't melted yet." I found the idea of a person as a lantern hard to understand. Afterwards, I made a great effort to polish my work. When he saw my

[10] Siyavush Tahmouress. AO

performance again in repertory, he said: "You'd turned into a lantern on fire."

**Please describe the group trip to Neishapur.**

It was during the first Tus Festival[11] that we travelled to a village near Neishapur to watch the *Ta'ziyeh of Seventy-Two Men*[12]. When we arrived, we were told that the *ta'ziyeh* would not be performed. Arby took us to the woods on the banks of a stream so that the group wouldn't be idle.[13] We hiked for about ten kilometers; now and again the men waded into the water and climbed up trees. The next day, we took the same trail, but this time he said, "You may not wade into the stream, you may not touch the fruits; you shall scatter about in nature and you may not talk to each other until noon."[14] Everybody was upset because they thought they were there to have fun; they said Arby can't stand to watch us do nothing. They say if one breaks through a barrier, one achieves transcendence. I went through that phase and attained a heightened sensibility that rose from my extreme anger. I remember one of the actors[15] was crying very hard and when the others approached to soothe him, he pushed them away angrily and said, "Leave me alone!" Unfamiliar energies had accumulated in him and induced that state. Arby wanted to see whether transcendence would be achieved or not.

## Alireza Mojallal — *Actor*

Tehran, summer 2006

**How did you join the Theatre Workshop?**

*Research*/Pazhuheshi had fueled an animated controversy at the Shiraz Arts Festival at the time,[16] and later in Tehran. A group of 'engaged' theatre intellectuals who believed that art had a political and social mission considered Ovanessian a formalist and strove to disrupt the performance.[17]

I was able to join his group in 1972.

**What characteristics distinguished him from other directors?**

He perceived dimensions that others could not readily see; he had a penetrating eye, and deep knowledge and focus. After working long hours, everyone needs some recreation or a means to rest their body and soul, not him; that's why we called him "Iron Man!" because it seemed

[11] A popular, annual event first held in 1975 in Tus, Ferdowsi's birthplace in northern Khorasan, the festival celebrated the *Shahnameh*, the icon of Iranian heroic poetry, and encompassed traditional arts and crafts as well as cinema and theatre; it was renamed *Imam Reza, Sun of Tus, Arts and Culture Festival* after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

[12] The seventy-two relatives of Imam Hossein believed to have lost their lives at the Battle of Karbela.

[13] As part of the group's exercise program, this trip was focused on encounters with nature. AO

[14] As on the first day, the exercise on day two was designed to observe the actors' personal reactions. AO

[15] Siyavush Tahmouress. AO

[16] Amir Taheri, "Shiraz Festival, Newsboy's Play Proves a Hit." *Keyhan International*, 8 Sep. 1968: 6.

[17] A reference to *Research*/Pazhuheshi at IAS/Tehran, where one performance was stopped for a few minutes due to the protesters' disorderly conduct and agitation. See "Report on Saturday Night's Production." *Ayandegan,* 22 Dec. 1968.

he suffered none of the personal temptations of an ordinary person. All his time was spent on learning, discovering human nature, and the essence of relationships. He was always the first to arrive at the rehearsal room and the last to leave. He always moved from a point that was unfamiliar to the actor and in the end helped them land in a familiar world; no-one knew for sure where this collection of movements would end up, but after a few specific exercises we would realize that these thought-out and well-conceived preparations — whose outcome might have not been known even to himself — had led us to such and such a text or theatrical realm. He would take the play's atmosphere and relationships into account and based on the actors' potentials, tools, skills, and improvisations, gradually arrive at a collective discovery and creation, a creation that always reflected the consonance and harmony that the director was after.

**What were the group's daily exercises like?**

We had mandatory body and voice exercises an hour a day, even if no work was in production. During the body exercises he would sit still quietly. There was always the possibility that he might change a routine any number of times prior to the performance. He loved his work and had the same expectations from his group. This characteristic made it difficult for many people to work with him, though that is what they craved.

Sometimes he tended to his actors in one-on-one sessions and nurtured whatever he wanted in them. I remember rehearsing a long monologue from one of Nalbandian's plays[18] in different conditions and at different hours, alone, as I followed his various suggestions. In doing them, I felt I was being tortured, but creativity and discovery surged at exactly those unbearable moments. One of his directorial idiosyncrasies was that he made the actors work in different emotional states and hours to get different effects out of them. Day or night, whether they felt cheerful or extreme fatigue, he would make them practice; ergo both actor and director attained to the sublime. He might ask the actor to accentuate only specific points in the text. Sometimes it was only a letter; he would say 'articulate it from where it begins and takes shape'. It felt like torture but as the exercise continued, it brought certain moments to life for us and a new discovery would materialize.[19]

**Were the monologue rehearsals preparation for the role of "A" in Arthur Adamov's *As We Were*?**

Arby's method in rehearsals was to guide the actor to the depths of the work, to probe and explore features and moments that ought to be highlighted, the dimensions that the actor was encouraged to discover and experience in the rehearsal process. One day he brought a large carpet, laid it on the floor of the rehearsal room, and asked me to crawl under it. I felt the weight of the carpet like a backpack on my shoulders and while moving under that very warm and dark space recited '*the kind youth*' monologue from Nalbandian's play. We rehearsed that scene for about a month. I don't know why those rehearsals stopped; I expected them to lead

[18] This seven-page monologue is from 'Death, death, I shall die,' a scene in Abbas Nalbandian's *Strange Tale . . ./*Qesseh-ye Shir-e Shad-e Shangoul . . . (TW publications 1972). CPG were given different texts as exercise material that could grow into a performance. The texts were sometimes set aside after initial testing and revisited later as appropriate. AO

[19] The purpose of the exercise was to let the actor feel the nucleus of the letter viscerally so that the sound would have the desired effect without superfluous emphasis. AO

to a one-man show. But soon after, we started *As We Were* — the best work of my artistic career. The distinct sensation that a backpack weighed heavy on my shoulders and that I had to either carry it to the end or get it off my back was with me the whole time I was onstage as "A". Those one-on-one rehearsals were a great help to me for that performance. He conducted his work in such a way that the actor ended up where he wanted him to land.

In the final scene of *As We Were*, a long, blue gauze spewed from under my shirt and inside my chest. During the performance, the gauze was folded and tucked under my dinner jacket. At the end, where "A," like a powerless insect caught in the web of a mighty spider is trapped by the dominant mother and aunt and has no other choice or way out, the gauze would spew out from my chest and fill the scene. "A" is standing downstage with his back to the audience. As the gauze flows out, the mother leads him to bed. He moves at her behest like a child and lies down under a cascade of blue gauze in a phantasmal light in the midst of an entangling mist or web, looking like a fetus curled up in a crib.

I carried the strange feeling from pervious rehearsals and exercises with me throughout the performance, and the heavy carpet was now a gauze that weighed on my chest and by spewing it out, I felt liberated from that burden.[20]

**What part did you play in *Man, Best and Virtue*?**

I played Belli, one of teacher Paolino's students who looked like a kid goat and wore a Boy Scouts outfit in black[21] with long sleeves and pants and scarf. He moved around and ruminated nonstop![22]

**In Camus' *Caligula*, each act takes place in a specific location. In Ovanessian's design, did the walkways signify a particular location? For instance, was the dining area separate from the royal palace?**

Not at all. The locations were not differentiated. The performance area at Tachareh in Persepolis housed three intersecting wooden walkways that extended from six stone doorways. Outside that area, it was extremely dark. We rehearsed in that space every night till morning for a long time, with minimal comforts.[23]

On the first nighttime rehearsal of the scene of Cherea's exchange with the senators we were very tired; it had been a hard day. During the rehearsal, Parviz Pourhosseini who was standing outside the performance area, decided to hop off the walkway so he could go around and make his entrance from another doorway; he didn't know that that exit was more than three

[20] For a 1972 interview with Ovanessian about the production see Theatre III, *As We Were*. For critics' reviews see Negin Sa'i, "Ovanessian Brings Adamov Alive in Tehran." *Keyhan International*, 21 Oct. 1973: 6, and Jamshid Chalangi, "Hamantor ke Boudeh-im." *Mardom,* 31 Dec. 1973.

[21] Priandello (d. 1936) lived at a time when Italian students were mandated by Mussolini to wear black, like the Fascist Blackshirts. AO

[22] Each character's behavior mirrored an animal that personified its part and was shaped during improvisation. In Pirandello's stage directions, other than Mrs. Parella (Virtue) and the teacher Paolino (Humanity) all other characters are likened to animals (chicken, fox, goat, monkey, cat, bear, and horse). Improvisations followed cues in the text. AO

[23] Rehearsals for *Caligula* at Persepolis were not held in the daytime due to extreme heat but started after sundown and lasted till dawn. The group rested during the day. AO

meters above ground; he thought it was at most one meter high, like all the other exits. On that, he jumped. In total silence and with great difficulty he hauled himself out of the gorge over to the side of the deck where Arby and the others were sitting. Pourhosseini was holding one hand with the other hand and calling him softly to tell him he'd had an accident. Arby wasn't aware of him. Those of us who were onstage could see him calling again and again. When he lifted the hand that covered his other hand, I saw that one of his fingers had flipped all the way back. The women offstage gave out a cry at that sight and then everyone realized what had happened. Arby said to take him to the hospital.[24] It was very hot; everyone was hungry and thirsty, and we were tired from exercising. Everyone expected the rehearsal to stop. But at a moment when everyone felt stressed and down, he suddenly said: "We'll take the Patricians and Cherea scene from the top. Start laughing." Everybody protested saying: "How can anyone laugh?! One is injured; another is thirsty and hungry . . ." But unrelenting, he said: "Nobody move! We'll take the scene from the top". So, then we had to continue the rehearsal roaring with laughter.

By midnight, the atmosphere of the scene had transformed into a truly stressful climate in keeping with the mode of the play. In the actual performance of that scene, we still laughed hysterically as before, except we now embodied the anguish itself. It's in such brilliant moments that a work is created, and new possibilities materialize.

**How did the director treat you in your role as Cherea?**

He stripped me of all the acting habits and tricks I had learned in the past. Even if my voice expressed any effect or mood, he would stop me and say, "Just read the text, line by line without any intonation; your facial expression must not change; control yourself; deliver the dialogues without an added mood." I would protest that the character is upset in this instance, or jealous . . . but he'd say, "Just recite the text; if you articulate the text correctly, everything else will fall in place naturally." It was as if they'd wrapped my whole body in duct tape and I had turned into a piece of wood. Having been cast, given my experiences prior to working with him, I expected to swagger away, no holds barred, as was standard. But he stripped me of all my prefabricated notions. I learned later that many psychological states do not necessarily lend themselves to being expressed through cliché devices. Anger buried deep beneath a quiet countenance can feel vastly more threatening than a hollow roar.

**What use did he make of objects and colors in his designs? Did objects acquire additional uses in the work?**

To make the action in the play palpable for the actors, he would hand us objects — where color was no doubt also a factor — and ask us to work with them. For instance, for the prelude to *Caligula,* which was an improvisation based on Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*,[25] he gave us a few bowls, a candle, a balance scale, a dagger, and a couple of picture frames. Some of these objects would find the right place in the exercises naturally and some would be eliminated.

[24] Parviz Pourhosseini reacted to this incident in a professional manner, silently so as not to disturb the rehearsal. He did not disrupt our work and was quickly transported to the hospital. After his dislocated finger was reset, he returned to the rehearsal and carried on. AO

[25] See Theatre III, *Ovanessian's Caligula*.

As Cherea, I had a voluminous book with blank pages and a black cover, plus a dagger. At the start of the performance all the actors were already onstage and while the audience was taking their seats, there was some action that signified the characters. For example, centerstage, Cherea held the book in one hand and the dagger in the other, which like the bowls of a balance scale were in perpetual opposition. It took a few minutes before the audience could settle in their semi-dark space. During the final moments of the prelude, the dagger vanquishes the book. The audience is watching silently and attentively when suddenly enormous projectors are turned on simultaneously with the blast of a very loud siren. The lights that blind the audience make everything go opaque, so no-one can see anything.[26] As the projectors turn off, the initial shock is followed by a brief silence and then Camus' words, *Always nothing. Nothing . . . nothing. Nothing . . .*! ring out in the assembly of the senators and Cherea.

**What was the dispute between Ovanessian and the actors after the performance of *Caligula* in Latin America?**

One reason the group dismantled in New York may have been that CT's new management had engaged some of the actors at a higher salary during their annual vacation, which disrupted TW's protocol. In those days we made 1,700 Tomans a month while government hires earned 4,000/mo.[27] Compared to other state-run theatre groups, Arby's ensemble had grown to become the best in the country. The actors expected him to defend their rights, but he was not interested in financial issues and didn't pay attention to salaries. He wouldn't get involved in a dispute that to him was peripheral.

## Dariush Farhang — *Actor*

Tehran, autumn 2006

**What do you think about your experience with Arby?**

Arby's work was fundamentally different from the mainstream theatre of the day such as traditional productions by the state-run Theatre Department or by university professors. I was active in a student group that was in-between, neither traditional nor avant-garde.

He could create theatre space even out of a small, unlikely corner. Most TW performances were leading-edge and avant-garde. As a co-founder of our student theatre group, I was dead against TW's outlook and ideology. Now with the passage of time I realize it isn't fair to extol one's own work and disparage someone else's.

[26] The moment the projectors turned on, all prelude actors would leave the stage. Sirens signaled Caligula's disappearance after his sister's death. AO

[27] Actors in the Theatre Dept. of the Ministry of Arts and Culture were hired full-time and salaried per the state job grade/pay structure; they also received a share of ticket sales. TW actors were offered one or two-year contracts and only beginning two years after the founding of TW; their salaries were raised gradually without consideration of their educational background—and varied. They also performed other tasks, including ticket sales, stage management, or as assistants, lighting managers. . . and were paid 20 Ts/night overtime for no more than ten nights a month on average. Once TW members were divided into groups and the performances started, actors with prior TW experience could earn up to 4,000 Ts/mo; others' salaries started at 1,200 and could reach 3,000 Ts/mo in future contracts if they continued working. AO

**In comparing the quality and quantity, and even the audience size, of TW productions with other pre-Revolution theatre centers, TW comes out as the most active.**

Yes. The thing is that I disagreed with TW and its practice, and with Arby Ovanessian, one of the Workshop's founders. He didn't have the least interest in financial matters. If he came by any money, he spent it on buying rare books and brought them to work for his group to use. In the end, we couldn't reconcile; so, after *The Cherry Orchard*, we stopped working together.

**Did you disagree with TW or with his working method?**

Both. In my view, TW was too avant-garde. Arby was among the first directors who was knowledgeable about the state of theatre around the world, and his view of theatre had no connection with our concerns. Of course, in retrospect, I'm more in favor of TW's outlook. Our differences lay in our respective interpretation of drama, existence, and life. What made acting impressive to me did not correlate with his outlook. I preferred our own student ways.

**Please describe this working method to clarify the differences in your outlooks.**

Our student group wanted to reflect its own times, since we were after a theatre that would impact the audience and be impacted by the audience and society in return. Such an attitude to theatre reflected the state of our society; that's why we couldn't reconcile with Arby because that issue was not marked on his path; society's footprint was missing in his works.

**What do you think about your disagreements about the interpretation of *The Cherry Orchard* today, the only play you performed with Arby?**

I now believe that our disagreements were in fact productive; that was the saving grace of those disagreements — constantly polishing oneself. I've learned a lot from our disagreements, confrontations, and differences of opinion.

**What have you learned?**

Patience, appreciation for contemporary theatre around the world, a wider horizon, good taste in stage design, simplicity, and aesthetics are the things I learned from Arby unwittingly. Also, transcending inherited frameworks and tearing them down, accepting differences in thinking, getting to know, and appreciating less-familiar approaches. With the passage of time, one's selfishness transforms into empathy. Back then, I unfortunately ended up leaving CPG.

**Didn't you discuss your problems with the director?**

We argued every day and every hour, and we each held on to our own position. But he never engaged in these conversations voluntarily.

**Did the arguments you mentioned have to do with acting?**

It was mostly Mehdi Hashemi and I disagreeing with his approach.

**What disagreements did you have about the rehearsals and the production of *The Cherry Orchard*?**

It's only natural that given our different outlooks toward theatre and our discordant personal rhythms we ran into difficulties in rehearsals and the performance process, which bothered me. In *The Cherry Orchard*, instead of addressing human issues, a different vision took shape.

In my view, in theatre an actor acts and in cinema the ideal actor is one that doesn't act. In theatre, the actor communicates repressed grievances and human sentiments. Arby did not believe in that kind of acting and would not license an actor to perform like that. Theatre is a realm where humanity's revolt, protests and cries are echoed through the actor. He did not want displays of fervor in his works. In his *Cherry Orchard*, there was little difference between his actors and the closets and costumes. In his set design, he made good use of the performance space at CT. My problem with him wasn't about his aesthetics, which I in fact liked; our main disagreement was about his interpretation of the text. I never understood what he was after in his rehearsals.

**So why did you participate in that work?**

After working with Peter Brook's group, I found it exciting to be part of an Iranian group that did innovative work.[28] And as time passed, I realized there had been no need for animosity.

**Why was there no relationship between actor and director — which is key — and why was there no trust between the two?**

It's only natural that in the end, an actor has to accept the director's outlook and think alike, practice, exchange ideas, and act in harmony with the group. It was like that at one point, but as time wore on, I couldn't abide by that rule. In *The Cherry Orchard*, I behaved more like an adversary than an artist.[29] Perhaps if he and I had been older, well, things might have been different. It wasn't until after we had grown distant that we started a dialogue.

Whatever they say about him that is dismissive or negative is not true at all. He was in fact a man of theatre and in the history of Iranian theatre, one with true artistic credentials. As an artist, his whole life was dedicated to theatre.

## Mahtaj Nojoumi — *Actress*

Tehran, spring 2007

**Why did you join the cast of *The Blue Outlet*/Rozaneh-ye Abi under Shahin Sarkissian's direction?**

There was a mutual feeling of love and friendship between our group and Sarkissian.

[28] Prior to joining CPG, Dariush Farhang was chosen in 1970 to do experimental work at ICTR and had trained under Ovanessian with the other Iranian actors for six weeks.

[29] See Theatre III, *The Cherry Orchard.*

**After Sarkissian died during the final rehearsals, Ovanessian apparently didn't alter the production and maintained Sarkissian's imprint on that work.**

The group wanted to stage *The Blue Outlet* in honor of Sarkissian in honor of his memory. Part of his unfinished mises en scène took shape under Arby's supervision based on Sarkissian's earlier rehearsals and work process.

Sarkissian knew the sensitive and hidden soul of Chekhov's works and believed that Akbar Radi's *The Blue Outlet* reflected the same spirit and subtleties, its insights being unlike other plays that were only superficially Iranian — with Persian words and idioms but with relationships and characters that lacked the depth we know in Iranian culture. In our culture, candor doesn't have much of a precedent in human relationships; instead, there is a lot of secrecy and veiled remarks where deeply disguised and cloaked ideas are exchanged. Shahin understood that and tried to expose it in the production.

I started under Sarkissian's direction. Work continued under Arby Ovanessian with a fresher look but with the same content and meaning, which turned out to be one of the most productive periods of my life, more important to me than my university studies. Arby's presence and his knowledge across all artistic domains helped me understand what values populated his world.

**Was Ovanessian in the rehearsals as *The Blue Outlet* designer from the beginning?**

Yes. He sat quietly in a corner, followed everything that happened, and occasionally shared his views about the work with the director in brief consultations. Sarkissian had a great deal of trust in him.

**For the production to continue after Sarkissian, the cast had to have trusted the group's young designer/director; what was the reason for such trust?**

His relationship to Shahin, his attitude toward the group, and his knowledge about theatre.

***Miss Julie* was Ovanessian's first production in Persian. He's stated that the rehearsals for that work were far more interesting than the performance. Would you agree? Why has it been remembered that way?** [30]

I reached my peak performance of *Julie* in the rehearsals. But I was unable to replay the same high point in the performance. The audience appreciated that the stage design and mise en scène had a completely different aesthetic than was the norm in Iranian theatre, but I was incapable of achieving a breakthrough performance — and for me as a young actress that meant a failure.

He had a certain grasp and understanding of actors — for instance, knowing which of their idiosyncrasies and capabilities, and what aspect of their temperament could nourish their role in a play — and he tried to strengthen those features through psychology without imposing himself. He wouldn't force the actor but rather let the character be born from within them. Many other directors, by contrast, tried to mold the actor in the same shape as their own

[30] See Theatre III, *In Pursuit of Collective Goals in Theatre.*

mental image of the character. The attention he paid to each and every person is what allowed him to understand all his actors. His understanding grew more thorough every day, serenely, and gradually.

He was the most democratic director I have ever known, though he also remained faithful to his personal ways and aesthetics. Not by mandating but by moving along with the actors step-by-step, offering analysis and inviting input, he gave them the opportunity to be active players in the making of a production.

**Reviews describe the production as simple in appearance while deeply complex. How close was the stage design to the spirit of the play?**

Very. It was one of the most original stage designs of its time, and close to the substance of the play itself. The subtleties and inner layers of the play had taken on a completely tangible form owing to his overall knowledge of Western culture. The *Julie* that he presented in his work was a discerning and delicate figure, with characteristics that were not only perceptible outwardly but dwelt inside her as well and were palpable.

**This phenomenon is found in most of his works, that is, what is invisible becomes visible and tangible.**

I remember the use of silence in his works very well — moments when silence holds between people — something that is rare in Iranian works. What happens during these silences is never noted directly in the text; it's this very act of cultivating it that distinguishes his works from others'; revealing what is hidden.

**How did he approach *Research*/Pazhuheshi?**

Michelangelo says a statue has to be discovered from inside the stone. That is what Arby did with the play. As we read it, the text sounded so bizarre and strange that we felt there was no way it could be staged. But he saw its theatrical potential. A new kind of non-narrative theatre with a distinctly conceptual charge had been unearthed by him. That is what we came to appreciate little by little in the course of the rehearsals.

**How was the underlying concept of this play transmitted to the actors?**

At the start, we had a preliminary introduction to the text with him and Nalbandian present to clarify its many ambiguities.

**Ovanessian has said about rehearsing *Research*/Pazhuheshi: "When my actors asked about the meaning of a sentence I'd tell them not to think about it but to merely recite it, or to imagine a similar sentence with a simpler construct".[31] Doesn't that mean the actors would be disassociated from a sentence they didn't understand and deviate from it in some way?**

[31] See Theatre III, *A Few Words with . . .*

He might have offered that guidance to a few. They might have not realized that the play had its own logic. Perhaps he treated each one of us differently, but he talked about the underlying concept in each sentence and about the interrelationships between the concepts across the sentences to all of us. For instance, there was the following sentence in the play: *I don't know if it was a birthday celebration or a birthday celebration or a birthday celebration.* That era was full of [official] birthday celebrations, which divided up the year and in effect blocked time for us.

In those days, a lot of people were for "engaged theatre"; well, *Research*/Pazhuheshi was the most engaged, the most critical, and at the same time the most political play there was. Even its title echoed that concept. The intense controversies that erupted with its performance were very positive and impactful because a play was performed that was radically different and unorthodox. By delivering a shock, he planted a new conviction and mindset in Iranian theatre, and that impact didn't slacken.

**_Research_/Pazhuheshi seems to be a challenging play for actors; most of the characters are ideas or concepts that get expressed.**

They are presences, or human presences in general.

**The characters in the play represent ideas. How did the text help you understand those individuals?**

These individuals are in fact archetypes, not character types.

**Did he offer you any advice other than during the rehearsals?**

It was indirect; when you worked on a play with him, you'd enter a workshop and learn about issues. The reward of working with him was the wisdom I was able to gain little by little. That urge for learning never again knocked on my door with other directors. What gravitated us toward him was the thought of crossing conventional lines. I had one of my best acting experiences in the rehearsals with him and I was fortunate to verge on very fine moments in acting.

## Ferdows Kaviani — *Actor*

Tehran, summer 2007

**What attracted you to the City Players Group?**

I had seen Ovanessian's theatre productions and found my interests to be close to his works. So, I resigned from the Theatre Dept. of the Ministry of Arts and Culture and joined TW.

At the time, work on *The Cherry Orchard* was underway. Arby had a lot of respect for his actors. His approach was to explore what I would say as an actor, what I would do, what inner feelings I would reveal. Occasionally he would tell his actor, "Keep that scene," meaning the rest of the scenes need to be worked on but this one we keep. He wouldn't say scrap the rest,

he'd just say, "Keep this scene". He would sit for a long time and just watch. He said little. His marked concentration gave the actors strength and self-confidence.

**His productions were not limited to one location. For example, *The Cherry Orchard* was also performed at a different venue than CT, at Bagh-e Ferdows. How did that change the form of the production?**

Right. The unconventional exercises designed for that play sparked protests even among some TW actors. We performed the play in silence from beginning to end, for instance, and were allowed to utter only one word or one sentence from the text — which is an effective concentration technique. These exercises were performed before TW club members. The full play also had runs at Bagh-e Ferdows and was well-received; the audience followed the actors to different corners of the site relative to the theme of each scene.

**You played Paolino in *Man, Beast and Virtue*.[32] Please tell us about it.**

Paolino was a world of dialogue and the lead character. In that production, just as in Comedia dell'arte where improvisation is key, various happenings occurred with the actors onstage during the performance.

**What special exercises do you recall doing for *Caligula*?**

Arby adopted some of the happenings that occurred in the exercises. There was one scene that didn't work, for instance, the scene where the Patricians mock Caligula. While taking a break with the guys, I jokingly said let's perform this scene in hysterics, and we did that as a lark. He said, "Keep that scene!" Although he had thousands of ideas, he wouldn't share them but instead let the actors shape works that were their own.

We performed *Caligula* as an exercise five or six times where we improvised in total freedom, scrambling the mise en scène that we had already developed and polished for performance. We would perform an exercise before the TW membership and completely change everything. Such a thing could only happen in harmonious ensemble work where the actors knew each other's sensibilities, and it precipitated amazing moments.

The first, second and third acts of *Caligula* had already taken shape and were ready, but we had not yet arrived at a mise en scène for the final act. Believe me, the day he asked us to perform that play from beginning to end, given our solidarity in the previous acts, the final act came into its own, impromptu, in one go.

**How did the improvised performances take shape?**

At the director's suggestion, we had a series of performances that had no pre-determined theme and where the actors did not plan anything among themselves in advance. As a rule, we spent some time in silence at the start. Sometimes I realized these exercises were unlike any-

[32] For a review of the production see Iraj Zohari, "Ensan, Heyvan va Taqva." *Tamasha Magazine*, 17 Mar. 1974: 57.

thing we had worked on before. He would only lay out the rules of the game for us. It was as if those plays were being written for the first time and simultaneously performed and staged. In his works, the actor was constantly creating. I'm still amazed at myself and my colleagues how it was that in one of those performances we acted onstage for two hours without anyone uttering a single word.

**What sort of input did he have after such performances?**

During those performances, he was also our audience. If he said anything afterwards, it helped improve the quality of our next improvisation. The rules of the game always remained constant and we were only responsible for the actual moments of our work.

**After the trip abroad to perform *Caligula*, what made some members leave the group?**

One of the objectives at TW was to have groups converge there and after gaining experience in workshop techniques, disperse. From the beginning of our trip we knew we were going to perform *Caligula* in New York.[33] When we arrived in the city after our performances in Venezuela[34] and Brazil,[35] we had had a long journey and had run out of money. According to U.S. Actors' Equity regulations, the performance date had to be announced in the press two weeks in advance, meaning we had to wait. Some of the actors were upset because TW's annual vacation period had just started, which created a conflict between their schedules in Iran and abroad. Since they weren't bound by any commitments or contracts, they chose not to stay to perform in New York. At that point Arby announced, "I no longer have a group; whoever wants to, can leave".[36]

We had one repertory at TW[37] and one at CT.[38] When I returned to Iran, I tried very hard to get the actors together again, alas, without success. So, in 1976, Susan Taslimi, Sadreddin Zahed, and I left TW with Arby Ovanessian. It was decided that the CT parking lot — which was unused and vacant — would be converted into a theatre. While that hall was under construction — it was later called Crossroads Theatre/*Chahar-su* (CRT — we prepared a variety of plays and began to perform the repertory.[39]

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[33] Ellen Stewart, theatre director and founder of La MaMa, E.T.C. (Experimental Theatre Club) had seen the work in Caracas and asked the group to perform it at La MaMa when they stopped in New York on their way back to Tehran.

[34] In 1976, at the invitation of the Festival of Caracas, CPG performed *Caligula* four times before an audience of 1,220 in Venezuela (re. TW Repertory Register).

[35] See Theatre III, *Caligula in Latin America.* Per NITV Annual Report, following Caracas, the group had five performances in Sao Paolo before audiences totaling 2,100, and one in Rio de Janeiro before 220. Prior to that, at the invitation of the Wroclaw Theatre Festival, they had eleven performances in Poland in 1975 before a total of 3,250 theatre goers.

[36] After returning to Tehran, Ovanessian did not accept any new contracts or commitments for CPG and left TW. Following an invitation from the 10th Shiraz Arts Festival, he started rehearsing with three actors at Bagh-e Ferdows. The result was *A Knight*/Savāri. CT had been shut down for major renovations. Ovanessian designed a plan to convert its unused parking lot into a theatre. Once approved, he was appointed director by Reza Ghotbi and began developing a program and selecting collaborators for the new venue, *Teatr-e Chahar-su*/Crossroads Theatre (CRT).

[37] The TW repertory spanned 1970-1976.

[38] The CT repertory spanned 1972-1976.

[39] The CRT repertory spanned 1977-1978.

**In fact, *A Knight*/Savāri was created right after the group split. Did all CRT members contribute to developing the text?**

Yes. We would propose some themes to Mahin Tajadod — the author of that work; she would then write some material and bring it to the group. The text was constantly changing, of course, and being constructed.

At the end of the play, when the dervish emerges from the cave — the prison — in chains, the space is flooded with light, which signifies his fusion with purity, and the child angel follows him as a manifest symbol of goodness.

**How was *A Knight*/Savāri received abroad and what changes did it undergo?**

In Caracas, we had intimate performances where the audience was seated on the stage of the opera house only, and we performed in their midst. On the first night, right before the performance we heard a lot of humming behind the stage's closed curtain; a large swath of the audience — who were mostly people that had seen *Caligula* two years earlier — had entered the opera house's large auditorium.[40] The curtain was at once drawn per Arby's order; we faced a large audience, some even seated in the balconies. Seeing that, we didn't carry on. After he gave an explanation to the audience, the three of us and the child quickly adapted the performance to a large hall.

We established a good relationship with the audience at La MaMa in New York as well, as the work was also new to them.

**How did your monologue go, *The Funny Old Man?***

The old man was a character who had created an imaginary court to decide whether or not to condemn himself. In the final rehearsals, Arby thought of adding another old man wearing a mask in my likeness that would initially sit in the theatre lobby like a member of the audience and enter the auditorium along with the rest when the performance started. He sat onstage with his back to the hall; it was as if another old man — which was me — was watching the court proceedings from the outside. We performed that play almost a hundred times, always to a packed audience. One critic described it as the most political play performed up till then.

**Why did you continue working with him?**

Because I was enthralled by his work. He loved his work. He let his actors apply their talents and creative powers.

[40] Due to poor signage by the opera house, some people had entered the auditorium through the main entrance and were caught by surprise; the hall was dark, and they were not supposed to be there. Once the curtains were drawn, I explained to the audience that the production was not designed to be viewed from the auditorium but that it would be, out of respect for them. That evening, a play that was supposed to be performed for a limited number of people on the stage behind the curtain was performed facing the large hall. The following evening, it was performed on the stage behind the closed curtain, and the size of the audience was proportionate to the space. AO

**Didn't these same characteristics apply to other directors at TW?**

I stayed with him to continue doing unconventional work, though I did work with other directors as well. Working with him was challenging. We used to work from morning till the late hours, and we did almost everything; for instance, the audience would face a ticket seller who also acted in the play that same evening.

In conclusion, I'd like to add that at CRT we decided we would select a number of plays and invite pioneers of theatre in the country to collaborate, and we would dedicate those performances to them in honor of their lifetime commitment to this art. The first was Mrs. Loretta[41] who collaborated with us in *The Sleeper's Den* and CRT was inaugurated with a play that was staged in her honor and with her participation. May she rest in peace.

## Mehdi Hashemi — *Actor*

Tehran, autumn 2007

**How did you first join the City Players Group?**

I joined the group along with Susan Taslimi and Dariush Farhang. I was with the group for two years. I clashed with Arby Ovanessian and left the group after performing in *The Cherry Orchard*. From then on, I was only in the audience for his productions.

**What prompted those clashes?**

If it were today, those clashes may not have occurred. It all had to do with the political climate at the time. I could see that with him, realistic plays were produced in a formalistic or other style, which I didn't like then. While I appreciated Arby's global vision, which resisted being local, and while as an actor I felt obliged to submit to the director's vision, still, the prevailing climate forced us to reject formalist works that refused to acknowledge our realities, or which tried to distort them. Outside, the spirit of anti-government protests had taken hold of us. One day when I was shopping at a bookstore where Mr. Khosrow Golsorkhi[42] was the bookseller he asked me, 'Why do you work with these venal reactionaries?' — he meant Ovanessian and others like him. I defended myself saying theatre is not directly related to politics, and that some people stage Brecht's works in such a way that even before the play's meaning emerges, they associate it with the current state of politics — which is poisonous for theatre — and that this group is a good group and given that groups typically don't last in Iran, the TW ensembles will be the vanguards of positive developments in theatre. Nevertheless, he was not convinced and regarded all those individuals as agents of the then autocratic regime.

[41] Loretta Hairapetian (Nooshin) (1911-1998), pioneering theatre and film actress and director, wife of Abdolhossein Nooshin. A widely admired star since the early 1930's, she studied the Stanislavski System at the Moscow Art Theatre after the death of Stalin but as an auditor since she was past the age to enroll as a regular student. Back in Iran in the mid-1960's, she collaborated with Ovanessian from 1973 on and performed in four plays that he directed.

[42] Marxist poet, journalist, and critic tried for plotting to assassinate the heir to the throne; he was sentenced to death and executed on 18 Feb. 1974.

**Given that you had decided to leave the group, why did you stay on after *The Cherry Orchard* and participate in the rehearsals for *Caligula*?**

Arby was very knowledgeable about theatre around the world, including about stage design and acclaimed directors. For the first time, I had come across a group whose work included highly professional body exercises, so much so that within a year, I felt my body had developed into that of a full-fledged professional actor's, like good actors around the world that are able to perform any kind of work. He wanted the group to be top level. From that point of view, I loved working in that group. But the formalist approach to work was at odds with the outlook of the anti-regime voices outside.

**What do you mean by formalist?**

The play that I felt had a social substance had been toned down and had lost its primary essence.

**His outlook and the kind of work he undertook with the group had to do with a search for novel forms in theatre production. Did you favor avant-garde theatre?**

By formalist I mean imposing a form that is modern in the extreme. I felt that in Ovanessian's work formalism always tried to predominate, and that being the case, the essence of the work would be lost. Nevertheless, I believe his works were the most important advents in theatre in those days, particularly in stage design.

**What about his directing?**

He was also very good at directing. He and his group, CPG, represented a major progress in theatre at the time. Had their activities continued, we would have had one of the best theatre ensembles in the world under his direction, someone who was erudite and had a genuine love for theatre. His vast knowledge and special discipline engendered many points of strength in me.

**In its short life, TW had successful experiments and productions. In both quality and quantity, it was way ahead of its peers. By contrast, the Ministry of Arts and Culture Theatre Dept. doesn't stand out, this, in a situation where both entities and other independent groups were subsidized by the state.**

TW was under the supervision of Artistic Director Bijan Saffari, someone who was instrumental in disseminating knowledge about theatre in Iran at an international level. Those were the golden years of TW and theatre. But the Theatre Dept. of the Ministry was more interested in domestic genres of theatre; that, too, owing to the exigencies of the age.

Serious, Iranian theatre blossomed at the Ministry in one period with the production of plays by Beyzaie, Sa'edi, Radi and other playwrights. Some of those works were very appealing from the point of view of acting, text, and production, but they were germane to that decade. When in the following decade international theatre became a phenomenon, a sense emerged that Iranian theatre was no longer adequate and that we needed to take those standards into account as well.

**And people who were locked into domestic Iranian theatre encountered the works of the world's iconic personalities at the Shiraz Arts Festival in the 1960s-1970s and saw experimental and leading-edge, world-class theatre up close.**

Yes, exactly. That's the decade during which historical, realistic productions fade in color. With the founding of TW, form, which is one of the building blocks of the arts, came into play: Khalaj who created Iranian theatre but in a compact and special form, or Arby who cast Iranian plays and texts in global molds and ways. TW was a very small space, but from Nalbandian — the manager and a very honorable man — to the rest, everybody was always on site working on theatre; and the work was multifaceted.

Arby was a remarkable individual with a wide learning in theatre, and au courant; he still is. Among his contributions was training actors and creating a group that survived for many years, for which I cannot find another example. I have never met anyone like him because he devoted his entire life to theatre and wanted to endow theatre with a universal spirit. His group had great capacity and potential and continued to stand out until the [1979] revolution because, I think, Arby was unique, especially in terms of stage design and the choice of venues where he performed, and in creating an atmosphere out of the spirit of the space.

One of his ingenious designs was in the production of *All at Once*/Nāgahan where he erected a very tall brick wall onstage at CT; it communicated everything about the mindset of the conservative tenants of the house in the play and their pressure on the lead character who is a captive in their grip.

**What do you remember about *The Cherry Orchard* special exercises at TW?**

In one exercise, he asked that each of us write down their own lines in sequence, like a monologue. What I learned from this exercise was Firs' worldview and thinking in a way I might have not discovered from the dialogues.

**You objected to one of *The Cherry Orchard* special exercises. Was it because you found it unacceptable?**

One evening, I felt I was doing something I don't believe in. It wasn't the exercise itself; it had to do with the spirit of the student protests in those days. I'd prefer not to talk about it, but one night, given that I didn't find performing that special exercise before an audience meaningful and didn't want to participate, I pretended to be sick. Mr. Nalbandian offered to take me to the hospital right away. Once we were outside, I told him, "Tell you the truth, I'm not sick at all but I really can't do this work." He was very kind but advised me to go ahead and perform that night, anyway, and I said, "I can't." They did the experiment without me.

**I meant the time you declared your opinion to the audience at the start of a special exercise; Mr. Fannizadeh[43] who was in the audience, leaves the house in affirmation of your protest.**

[43] Parviz Fannizadeh, film and television actor best known for his role as Mr. Hekmati in Bahram Beyzaie's *Downpour* (1972), and as Mash Qassem in Nasser Taqva'i's TV series *My Uncle Napoleon* (1976).

I remember now. We were preparing backstage when I told Arby I didn't believe in that particular experiment and wanted the audience to know that. He said all right, and at the start of that performance announced it to the audience — that I didn't believe in that process. My decision probably had to do with my conversation with Golsorkhi and others, to let them know that I wasn't beholden to TW's method and direction. This sort of thing happens in youth.

**What made you decide to continue working with him?**

It's because I loved all my colleagues. I loved Arby, Nalbandian, and Saffari. I loved our body movement exercises, the atmosphere at TW, and everything about it.

**What did you want the audience to know?**

I wanted them to know that I didn't like that method, and also for my friends out there who wouldn't come to TW to know that I didn't approve of it. Arby was very patient. Perhaps he took my reactions to be on the level. I had my eyes on getting the part of *Caligula* with much excitement, and I aimed to show a sort of destructive spirit that lived inside me in connection with *Caligula* who himself is destructive.

**How did your rebellion stop you from acting in *Caligula*?**

You can ruin everything by chasing an ideal that you don't fully understand. I knew *Caligula* would bring me many credits. The more the credits, the more I turned against myself.

I considered Arby the most ideal director for myself. For me, everything about him surpassed regular theatre artists, from his looks and appearance to his endless knowledge.

**Didn't he ever argue with you?**

No. He was extremely ethical and merely shared his views. One time during the opening rehearsals for *Caligula* when Parviz Pourhosseini and I were reading it as a test, his response to my argument was: 'The actor has to be at the director's disposal; even if I told you to move like a quadruped, you'd have to do it,' and I replied that I won't if I don't want to. Word reached Bijan Saffari and a meeting was held. Arby didn't banish me from his group and didn't want me to leave the Workshop, but the relationship had soured, and I didn't want to stay on.

**What is an example of your technical difficulties? How did the director respond when you put it to him?**

I didn't like behaving like a robot. But he would say you have to be patient, be patient until you get there . . . but we weren't getting anywhere.

**Why couldn't something take shape in the meantime?**

If Dariush Farhang and I didn't have our own student theatre group, we might have stayed in

Arby's group. His theatre was professional and avant-garde. He understood me, and if we had stayed on, our differences might have been resolved. If I had been older or if I had not been under the influence of political activists who cast TW in a negative light, these differences would not have emerged. It's a shame that that environment came to an end because otherwise we could now claim to have a theatre group of an unmistakably international caliber.

**Back to *The Cherry Orchard*, what sort of unconventional exercises did you do?**

He would tell the actor, don't stop at what that I suggest or the path you think you should take; experiment with the other aspects of the role as well — since it was possible that we would arrive at something else altogether and adopt that for the production. For example, he would say, read this dialogue differently, or turn it into a monologue and then read it; now read it with a different tone and voice. A dialogue could be screamed or whispered, spoken fast or slow or even with animal sounds for the character's subtleties to emerge, both vocally and physically, for the brain to work harder and for the actor to better understand his/her capabilities. He tried to make us understand that there were many different methods for capturing a part. At times, even the actors and the roles were changed around. Though he was attentive to form, he was also very realistic and wanted the actors to be natural. He let the actors be free; he would say, "Do it as far as is necessary."

**Do you mean he let the actors take a realistic approach to the part?**

Realistic, not animated; the actors in that group were not particularly animated.

**Please explain what you mean by animated.**

A powerful actor shows more aspects of a life in his behavior and bearing than an untalented actor who feels lost and passive. I like acting that's highly animated otherwise I get bored acting.

**Did he give his actors freedom of movement?**

I wish he didn't; it would have been better to share what he knew about the varieties of expression and movement, or what he knew about life, because a young actor doesn't have enough experience to know. He paid more attention to creating an atmosphere. I considered him a first-class designer first and a director next. Of course, he also had a unique management style that I haven't seen in anyone else. He created an environment that had all the elements of theatre, an environment fit for a theatre group to work in. He managed the group very well; the actors had a sort of group life and did every kind of work. That's how I think theatre ought to be, not like today where an actor performs onstage so as to then head to television and so on. His group had an ensemble life in the real sense of the word. The actors were responsible for running the theatre themselves; they'd sell tickets and do other things.

**What were some other features of the rehearsals?**

One had to have a lot of patience and forbearance at the rehearsals until what he wanted was

achieved. Contrary to other directors, he wouldn't explain anything to the actors but let them get it by themselves. Though he conducted a large variety of exercises, he interfered little with the acting itself. The refusal to impose the personality he had in mind on the actor made him the antithesis of directors that forced their personal mode and expression on actors, who then came to resemble them; he wanted that something to spring from the actors themselves. After a few months of rehearsals, however, what I saw was an actor whose performance was lifeless, monotonous.

**It takes a lot of trust and a long time for such harmony to evolve . . .**

Perhaps if all his actors were professional, a few hints by the director would have sufficed for them to deliver what was needed so the director would be freed to create the atmosphere; Susan Taslimi and Parviz Pourhosseini fit the bill.

The points I made were about the one and a half years when I was part of the group. Their later works grew increasingly polished; they would have likely faced no challenges in the future. Their evolution was especially evident in their latest works, an example being Susan Taslimi's brilliance in *The Sleeper's Den*.[44]

Some of Arby's productions are landmarks in the history of Iranian theatre, so is his training a generation of actors, the longevity of his theatre group, several years of concerted and uninterrupted work that included developing repretories at TW, CT, and CRT, creating a focalized group, conducting workshops, and a lot more.

## Siyavush Tahmouress — *Actor*

Tehran, summer 2008

**Many people agree that Arby Ovanessian's work was way ahead of its time. What is it, in your opinion, that made his work distinct?**

The difference between him and other directors was that he broke the norms. He had courage and audacity and refused to be trapped by conventions. Nor did he shy away from making his point in his own style. His most important distinction is that he never copied anyone. His greatest work, in my opinion, was *Caligula* where he articulated his view of society and his take on the play. In fact, after the run of *Caligula* when I asked him, "Why don't you continue working in this genre that's been so successful?" he said, "I'm not after winning others' approval; I'm after my own objectives." He didn't care what people thought about his actors or his method.

His reading of *Little Eyolf* was such that he assigned the role of Alfred Allmers to me; he had recognized that he could extract that character from my nature, habits, temperament, and personal conduct.

[44] For a production review see Janet Lazarian, "Strange Happenings in the Parking Lot." *Tehran Journal*, 9 Mar. 1978: 7.

**Was the character radically different from what was known about your personality?**

Yes. Arby understood that he could assign a radically different role to me. I wish I could perform that role once again under his direction. Over these past years, I've discovered deeper meanings in it. He went out of his way to let you grasp a role on your own.

**What criteria did he use to select actors for specific roles?**

An actor's physical appearance was not that important; what counted was their personal attributes and temperament. He knew what personal attributes could function well in a situation or a moment.

When he staged *Little Eyolf* at CT, it had no set or decoration except for a yellow cyclorama that he used to denote the play's psychological dimensions.[45]

**How did he guide his actor toward a role, and what path did the actor have to follow?**

He never dictated any points to the actor but let them be free to recreate a character's different traits. That said, he would masterfully lead them toward the role. Other directors tried to play the part for you or were constantly telling you what to do, but he let a discovery happen for the actor.

**Every actor faces personal obstacles in portraying a part. How did Arby remove obstacles?**

Through extensive exercises. He made me repeat so many times and explore such different paths that I would finally get there. In the case of Alfred Allmers, I didn't feel up to the task of playing that challenging role. He never told me directly what to do, but he took great pains to help me forget myself and inhabit that character. Whenever he said, "You weren't Allmers" he meant I was the Tahmouress that was playing that role, and he was only satisfied when I finally embodied the part. I was also cast in *All at Once*/Nāgahan and *Man, Beast and Virtue,* but the satisfaction I derived from playing Alfred Allmers was second to none.

**His ensemble worked on two tracks: first, preparatory exercises relevant to each production, including play reading and parallel activities, and second, special exercises that were part of the theatre training routine and which each actor absorbed relative to their personal talents and aspirations.**

We conducted a series of group exercises to prepare works for the stage, and a different series of individual activities, like the music that we listened to or the exercises we did jointly, plays

[45] Yellow was associated with fire and drawn from an Ibsen poem, translated by A. G. Chater: *They dwelt, those two, in so cozy a house / In autumn and winter weather / Then came the fire – and the house was gone / They must search the ashes together / For down in the ashes a jewel lies hid / Whose brightness the flames could not smother / And search they but faithfully, he and she / 'Twill be found by one or the other / But e'en though they find it, the gem they lost / The enduring jewel they cherished / She ne'er will recover her vanished faith / Nor he the joy that has perished.* The poem appeared in the CT playbill in a Persian translation by Abbas Nalbandian. See Theatre III, *Little Eyolf*, and *I Prefer Ibsen the Poet . . .,* and the review by LalehTaghian, "Shayad dar Biyaban-e Khali Rahi Baz-shaved." *Ayandegan*, 29 Dec. 1973: 6.

that we discussed, and the movements that we practiced together. These activities were independent of production-based issues and instilled a kind of constructive spirit in us. We would listen to music together, for example, and discuss its effect on our emotions or the landscape it conjured in our minds. We discovered ourselves through these sessions and came to know each other better. I understood, for instance, how a certain piece of music had affected me and others, and we found out how similar or different or close these effects were on our counterpart. The relationship among the actors was the product of the reciprocal emotional insights that emerged from the heart of our theatrical exercises.

**What methods did you use to capture the character of Helicon in *Caligula*?**

The methods were different for each play; in that instance, I was free to approach Helicon predicated on how he handled Caligula's problems. At first glance, he comes across as a mere counsellor, but we discovered his other attribute: Helicon was basically Caligula's clown and manager. Outwardly, he acts like an entertainer; in reality, he is his master's manager and active intellect.[46]

**The mask that you wore on the back of your head, was it to display your character's other profile and personality?**

Yes, his duality resembles Caligula's. I wore a hat with two donkeys' ears, which had a pointed meaning.

**Were these objects brought to rehearsals, so you could use them in improvisations?**

No, not at all. It's not as if he brought that hat to the rehearsal so that I'd then use it; it was added on after we shaped the role. We used to start special exercises after completing the routine voice, music, and body exercises, and were sometimes at them from morning till midnight. Then Arby would say, "Now get on the stage and start." OK, but start what? A laughter, a move, one fumble, or somebody would trip up, and the play would start. You have no idea what strange things happened in those sessions!

**How did these improvisations happen in the group?**

Well, it's very hard to improvise in a vacuum. It's one's encounters and group work that spurs certain originalities. That's why we performed entirely improvised special exercises before audiences.

**In what ways did the public exercises impact the actors?**

Open-mindedness created the right condition for improvisation and made the actors give their all for the world to see. For instance, in *Little Eyolf*, Alfred Allmers was in love with his sister, which is why he had a crippled relationship with his spouse. The symbol of this rela-

[46] See Theatre III, *Ovanessian's Caligula,* and Iraj, Zohari, "Caligula." *Tamasha Magazine*, 8 Aug. 1974.

tionship was Eyolf, his crippled son. I, an actor, cannot easily expose my fractured relationship with the world and existence in front of you because I lack the courage; but as Alfred Allmers, I experienced that relationship in a way and was able to communicate it. When you come into such a relationship in life you find it very difficult, but when an actor achieves it, it's very gratifying and beautiful. In our group, we tackled such questions and relationships a lot.

I remember when we were in Wroclaw to perform *Caligula,* a Hungarian director [*sic.,* actor] approached us and said, "There is such a strong bond among you, and you exchange such energy among yourselves that I'm amazed. We aspire to that kind of energy. How did you get to the point where even when you have your back to each other the energy still irradiates, and you can sense the other actors' feelings as they speak their lines?" Well, that had been achieved through group harmony and with Arby's directing.

**Did any of the actors run into difficulties in the special exercises?**

We always had discussions. These discussions helped the group reach into and discover the work's hidden corners. In one special exercise, Mehdi Hashemi even confronted Arby. I think he hadn't understood Arby correctly in that particular exercise because later on when he performed as Firs, he was terrific. Arby created the conditions where the actors were forced to display all their creativity and bare themselves, even if it led to confrontation.

**What was the greatest benefit and impact of the experiments for you personally?**

His breaking down the norms might have influenced me subconsciously. Because after I left the group, I wrote a play and directed it — successfully, too. Working with Brook and Arby gave me experiences that I may not be able to analyze but have lived.

**Did a few actors leave the group because they believed he had ties to the regime?**

He had no ties to the regime whatsoever and did not engage in any political activity at all. Many individuals left because of their personal biases or defied him and resisted. Many critics that used to take a stand against him and his work changed their position after the successful performance of *Caligula* as they had not understood his works before then. I'm not trying to defend him and the reason I left was not that I was against him either.

**He, uninterested in fame and fortune, still believes in and remains faithful to his profession, even if he doesn't produce a play.**

He's proven that he can remain a genuine artist in the true sense of the term. His actions and worldview can serve as a model.

## Susan Taslimi — *Actress*

Stockholm, summer 2008

**What distinguished Arby Ovanessian's work from his contemporary directors'?**

His purpose when working on a play was to explore and unravel its inner core. He greatly valued the actor's personal effort to unearth buried subtexts. In those days, directors used to first analyze the play for the actors; the actors would then share their thoughts and rehearsals would follow onstage. Arby had a different approach. For him, mise en scène didn't mean guiding and blocking actors; rather, it was about discovering a play's inner current and force during the course of the rehearsals.

His objective was to remove the boundary between character and actor. Overall, he was fiercely averse to common and conventional forms of acting. He used to say that 'the actor is the greatest obstacle to the presence of the character; this obstacle has to be removed'. He believed that actors prejudge the characters and that prejudgments thwart the characters' inner reality from coming to life.

He paid attention to the actor's inward and outward susceptibilities. One day during an exercise he asked one of the actors: "Why do you flail your arms about when you talk? This is your personal habit and doesn't belong to the character." The next day when the actor did it again, he brought a rope, tied the actor's hands behind his back and said: "You can perform without flailing your arms. Words do not need your arms." He could tell which movements and sentiments belonged to the characters and which to the actors.

**How were the play readings conducted?**

We simply read out the plays for a good while without superimposing a tone or a mood. Essentially, the purpose was to release energy and discover the inner world of the text beyond the dialogues. While play reading, we also freely practiced movements for a time. Other exercises were mostly focused on play reading techniques, finding the beat, the pauses, and intensity. In the process, each actor gradually found channels that were personally compatible and specific to themselves.

**What else differentiates his work from other directors'?**

During my seven-year collaboration with him as an actor, I felt at ease in his presence because I didn't feel any anxiety or pressure to demonstrate a skill at every rehearsal to gain his approval. He greatly valued the actors' self-discipline and decorum and was very patient in his work. What mattered to him was harmony and evenness in the performances. He didn't discriminate between minor and leading roles. He made time for everyone; he didn't want a few to shine and the rest to be underwhelming. In fact, he worked harder with weaker actors. For him, what mattered was the quality of the production as a whole. He was highly inimical to producing stars; that kind of theatre had no meaning for him.

**He has said, "Acting is about sharing moments together and communion with the unknown, where the unknown may at times be something ordinary," communion with the occult (unknown) world — what is not spelled out in a text, or silences within a play, for example — and discovering it was something he valued.**

Arby canceled out the actor's typical techniques and habits; instead, he put the actor in a condition that led to the discovery of unknown dimensions in their inmost selves in relation

to the role. Thus, playing a role lost its meaning in a sense. The roles were born and nurtured at the intersection of the actor's subconscious in a theatrical context. As such, every rehearsal was unpredictable. The final form of the production took shape gradually. We started with simplicity and a void. The stage was bare; the only presence was the text and the actors' interrelationships. Objects, stage design, and costumes evolved in the course of the rehearsals in tandem with the characters. The goal was clear, but nothing was determined in advance.

**How did he discover his actors' premeditated choices and how did he cancel them out?**

I'm not sure; he just knew; the moment we applied them he'd stop the rehearsal and say, "Start over." When we asked why, he wouldn't respond right away. After multiple repetitions when the actor had become flustered, he'd say, "Return to your spot calmly and don't make a fuss for no good reason. Start from the beginning; don't air a tone; don't share irrelevant sentiments and eliminate all superfluous movements." Or he would say, "I've seen these infinitely repeated acting recipes in a hundred plays already." He believed that actors want to feel secure and thus assume that a performance that's been successful in a prior play will prove equally effective in a new play and a new role. He used to say, "The acting styles of many performers grow similar over time and that gradually becomes a habit." In my experience, working with him was like walking on a layer of ice; there was a constant danger of slipping and losing one's balance.

**While preparing for a production, you did try-outs before TW members. Presumably, some time had to elapse before these special exercises were performed before a regular audience. How long did it take before these exercises matured and what was their effect on the actor?**

We had complete freedom in those types of exercises. What he wanted was for the audience's presence to produce a new dimension in regards the actors and the text. Those special try-outs always facilitated the growth and continuity of our work. They brought to light certain subtleties in the relationships between the characters that we were unaware of before.

For instance, we performed *The Cherry Orchard* several times before an audience at Bagh-e Ferdows in the spring. In some of those try-outs, the scenes were performed in sequence in different rooms inside the building and in the garden. In a scene from Act 2, I was performing Ania's encounter with Trofimov — played by Parviz Pourhosseini — among the trees in the garden. In the fall, we did the exercise differently for three nights before audiences at TW. The first night, the entire play was performed normally, with the full text, from beginning to end. On the second night, about half an hour before the start, Arby told us offstage: "Tonight, perform the entire play without speaking the lines, in silence." Some were surprised; questions came up; heated arguments ensued. Anyway, before the play opened, he stepped out before the audience and explained: "The performance will take place in total silence. This experiment is necessary for nurturing our work and the actors are free not to participate if they don't want to." I was then in my last month of pregnancy and was not supposed to participate in any productions. My understudy was to substitute for me that night, but she had quit work because of the arguments backstage and left. I asked Arby to let me join the performance. Given that my physical state had no affinity with the seventeen-year-old Ania, he hesitated at first, but soon agreed. Everyone has a personal experience of that special exercise. For me, the atmosphere was very strange. Eliminating the dialogues had transported us to other dimensions. Mental connections had intensified and concentrated. What was happening onstage was assimilating the moments, not delivering dialogues.

**You did another experiment where the acts were performed out of order.**

Yes, on the third night of a program of special exercises, we did not perform the acts of *The Cherry Orchard* in sequence; we did a similar experiment with *Caligula* as well. Following Arby's exercise scheme, everyone was free to start from whatever point of the play they wished and continue until they were back where they had started. Like a circle, it would start from one scene and after faring the full course of the play, end at the starting point. None of us picked the same timeframe in the narrative. There were moments when two actors would be facing one another and exchanging dialogues related to two different timeframes.

The greatest impact of these kinds of exercises was that they intensified the actor's presence. Everything became unpredictable. As I see it, in these exercises, he blocked the actors' recourse to reason and placed them in a world that was in closer touch with the unknowns in their inner being — unresolved secrets and mysteries, dark corners of the subconscious, hidden or forgotten. It was out of these or similar experiments that a play or the characters would at times come to life and grow. These experiments were extremely helpful in producing concentration and group harmony and fostered a presence of mind.

**You had so internalized Mrs. Shannon's role in *The Sleeper's Den* that it was hard to tell her apart from you. That was a road already traveled; why isn't Ania like that in *The Cherry Orchard*?**

Mrs. Shannon's moments of madness — after the death of her mother — came from an unknown source that made me feel scared even. Since then, six years had passed in our daily collaboration and experimentation. We understood each other better. Acting was not an issue anymore; the character unfolded within its own reality and flowed between us.

**Was that due to the process and the special discipline you had acquired by then, or did the text and associated exercises hold a unique place for you?**

It was merely due to the process. My unsuccessful performance of the role of Ania was one of the most crucial experiences of my acting career and proved enormously helpful to me in executing my next role, Grazia, in Pirandello's *Man, Beast and Virtue,* the play that for me was an enormous and cardinal turning point.

My part in that play was very small; I was a maid in a house, and other than a brief monologue had no more than three or four lines. For example, I'd walk in and say: "Ma'am, this gentleman is here to see you." In the beginning, I didn't know what to do with that role; it really didn't seem to have any room for development. After a while, I shared my concern with Arby and he said, "Go on working as is and don't think about the challenge of the role; just be present in the moments and in the relationships."

Grazia — my character — had the attributes of a horse. At the time, after two years of working daily on understanding and expressing the body, harmonizing, voice, concentration, breathing, and so on, I had acquired the tools of acting but I didn't know their exact function in conveying a character. I merely knew instinctively that an actor needed those tools just as a carpenter needs nails and a hammer. The fact that Grazia had few lines and spoke little gradually helped me discover another world, a world unrelated to a rational understanding of the character. I felt the presence of

another person in myself who was very different from me and who acted onstage at will. I wore wooden mules that conjured the sound of a horse's gait when I walked and resounded a tune of their own as they clacked against the floor. A tuft of hair covered my face and eyes and my comportment had become horse-like. Knowing the function of sound, beat, tone and rhythm in speech and movement was vital to performing that role.

We learned acting techniques, but the goal of that learning was to expand the actor's potentials and group interrelationships. If a technique was noticeable in an actor's performance, Arby wouldn't allow it; he would stop the work.

**Can you give us an example of an invisible technique in playing that role?**

The movements onstage had to correlate with the character's internal and external traits and communicate that reality. In other words, I had to locate a horse's soul in Grazia's body.

**Your approach to Caesonia in *Caligula* seems very different in form and function from Mrs. Shannon in *The Sleeper's Den*. Could you elaborate on your performance in these two plays?**

These two characters are totally different and operate in totally distinct universes. *The Sleeper's Den* was a modern drama and had to do with everyday events. *Caligula* was a different case. *Caligula* was a historical play that the director did not wish to produce in a conventional form; he instead wanted to display the crux of the through the fissure in Caligula's emotional make-up and personality. The work was not conceived as a period piece. The idea was to communicate a notion inherent in the play, which was about the existential essence of humanity. Our group harmony was extraordinary. My part came to life under those conditions. My quest was to find Caesonia's primal and animal spirit — her fears and aggressions, her recklessness, and her unpredictability.

**In *The Cherry Orchard*, there are many moments of silence, and observing them onstage is critically important. Another case is *The Sleeper's Den* where at the end of the play you stare at the audience in silence. Please tell us about these silences and the intricacies of that role.**

As a rule, in silence and in standing onstage a certain potency pervades the actor that is mysterious and terrifying; it puts one in a state of mind that one hasn't experienced before. In my view, Arby's work is poetry, and he's a poet.

Nothing happens in a silence that's lifeless. Silence is charged with sensitivity, weight, and a certain force. He used silences to evoke connections onstage. A poetic concept. Those were as significant to him as written words. In his view, words are meaningless in and of themselves; it's the characters that endow them with meaning. Characters are in effect living beings that carry the load of sensitivities and emotions. They use words to either express or mask notions that have their own unique sense.

**At the start of a new work, what was his entry point to help an actor get to know the character, so they could nurture it on their own? What sort of suggestions, and what kind of support did he offer you?**

In *The Cherry Orchard,* I didn't understand his remarks at all as that was the first time I had worked with him, and no director had ever talked to me about theatre and acting in that way. I listened to everything he said attentively and with concentration, but the more he spoke the less I understood. A large part of his comments had to do with the actor's transparency, but then I had no idea how one might be transparent. He would tell me, "You have to look for your inner susceptibilities and relate them to Trofimov, Gayev, and Ranevskaya." I thought that's exactly what I was doing but I didn't know what he wanted from me. Although I had previously played important roles in major plays in college and had also been a top student, none of my prior experiences and learnings helped me in the work I did with him because his method was beyond my grasp. The approach was centered on a search for new paths in the theatre arts. Naturally, these searches were not easy; at times they were a dead end and at times they worked.

I felt distant from my character. Many who had seen the production said I gave a strong performance, but I knew it wasn't so. I wasn't concerned about being strong or weak or receiving accolades and praise. The problem was that my connection to the character hadn't crystalized.

The production of *The Cherry Orchard* provoked some backlash, which was a positive development in the history of theatre in Iran. The staging was different and unconventional, and the play's poetic dimension carried a greater weight for the director — the spirit of the past and the children's infancy, Madame Ranevskaya, Gayev, and their obliviousness to the fact that the world was changing, the orchard was about to be sold, and their youth had passed by. In his search, he was looking for a different mode of theatrical expression.

**You mentioned Ranevskaya's and the family's past; the majority of plays that Ovanessian produced have a relationship to times past.**

He has a spiritual outlook in his work as in his everyday life. He believes in esoteric worlds that cannot be known with a rational approach. For him, time is neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but an eternal moment that entails the past, present, and future. Arthur Adamov's *As We Were* straddles two different periods of time; the lead character lives in the time both of his childhood and maturity; he is both a boy and a man.

**Was the backlash related to his interpretation of the plays or to something else?**

The unconventional nature of his work combined with his tenacity and self-assurance used to generate some backlash. In autumn 2003, seeing photographs of the productions of *Little Eyolf* at the 'Ibsen in Iran' conference in Oslo, many Norwegians were utterly surprised by the way the play had been staged in Iran thirty years earlier; for them, our productions were much more innovative than contemporary productions in Europe.[47]

[47] See Farindokht Zahedi, *Henrik Ibsen and Iranian Modern Drama*: *Reception and Influence*. Acta Humaniora, University of Oslo, 2006: 139-140, and 180-191. In 2003, Ovanessian presented two seminar papers at the Ibsen Museum in Oslo titled "Ibsen in Iranian Theater: Known and Unknown Facts," and "The Fire and the Water: Why and How I Staged *Hedda Gabler* and *Little Eyolf* in Iran."

**As an actor, what was your imprint on the role of Caesonia in *Caligula*?**

My role was born amid the existing harmony, the actors' interrelatedness, and the force that permeated the rehearsals. Arby created an atmosphere and delegated the situations of the play to us. For instance, before the scene of Caligula's festivity, he handed me a red fabric — it was about fifteen meters long — and said, "Enter with this fabric and cover the floor." I didn't know how I was supposed to do that. I waited my turn offstage. The moment I walked on, with no control over myself, I stormed the stage with an uncanny energy and voice like a roaring beast and crossed the floor from right to left. The red fabric drifted behind me and given the fast pace of my stride, rose aloft like waves in a sea of blood; the atmosphere had all at once transformed into a poetry of rage.

The scenes in *Caligula* were like realities in dreams. When Caesonia was slain by Caligula (Sadreddin Zahed), Caligula's double (Parviz Pourhosseini) could see him, as if seeing his own reflection in the mirror. Caesonia's corpse lay on the floor, a lovers' scene that had ended up in murder. In the text, Caligula looks at himself in the mirror, but in Arby's production — a first such staging of this play — two Caligulas come face-to-face.

**When the actors were supposed to follow an undetermined path, how did the director control the trajectory?**

He knew the goal and had already chosen the trajectory. The improvisations were done within a specific framework, which is why the work never went off track. He always sat in his corner, razor-sharp and calm, and followed every single second of the work. He would talk to the actors after the rehearsals and retain whatever was needed and eliminate whatever was superfluous. That is how the visual form, the flow, and the actors' movements would gradually evolve. Stage design, costumes, objects, and lighting were developed in tandem with the rehearsals. When a scene worked, his eyes sparkled with joy. When he was satisfied with his actor's work, he would say, "That moment was right; follow the same path." He never praised or complimented an actor. So, we either had to trust him or not. He recognized each actor's distinctive traits, which they themselves may have been unaware of. His aim was to discover and cultivate those aptitudes. That is why I could trust him.

The role of Caesonia was the climax, and really the deciding factor of my acting career. After that, he asked me to play Asta Allmers in *Little Eyolf*, which was 100 percent at variance with Caesonia and had a different psycho-behaviorial quality. In working on Asta, I had to distance myself 180 degrees from Caesonia.

Every play and production had its own intrinsic atmosphere and specific visual form but in the end they all belonged to Arby's distinct world and expression. A new work was a continuation of the previous one and not its repetition.

**It's the actor's motivation that generates energy; if the actor is noncommittal and the director offers no comments, no doubt nothing will take shape. How did he kindle that energy and motivation in you?**

In my case, it had to do with a subliminal connection. Between him and me, questions and answers were not exchanged in the usual way. I communicated with him in silence. Perhaps it's my personal nature that when I trust the director, I don't engage in unnecessary discus-

sions and analyses.

After I stopped working with him, the only time I performed at CRT was in the *Death of Yazdgird*, directed by Bahram Beyzaie, a year after Arby had left for France. One night during the performance, I suddenly felt he was sitting in the audience; I honestly thought he'd returned to Iran and had come to see the play and my performance without warning. I could clearly make him out among the people, and when the play was over, even went and looked for him . . .

**As an actor, what was the source of your trust in him?**

It was essentially intuitive; it had to do with an understanding that even I find inexplicable.

**Perhaps one reason for his success in relation to you and the other actors was that he bared certain aspects of your personality that you hadn't encountered before, and every actor was awestruck about how he had acquired such an insight.**

That's probably true. For me, working with him had more to do with exploring my inner world and nurturing my latent acting potentials. In my understanding, acting is a spiritual connection. For me, theatre promises revelation and inner gratification. The time that I worked with him, the magical world of theatre was a reality for me. I hated Mondays because it was our weekly day-off.

**Talk about *The Sleeper's Den* and how you managed to access Mrs. Shannon's fears and anxieties? How did the form and the working method differ from your other performances?**

On the surface, *The Sleeper's Den* had realistic elements. We did not do special exercises before audiences. In the beginning, we tried to follow the author's stage directions to the letter. After a while, our insights matured even as our inner relationships deepened vis-à-vis the characters. In that play I was onstage with Mrs. Loretta — the brilliant star of Iranian theatre; she played Mrs. Shannon's mother. Her acting experience didn't create any imbalance during the rehearsals. In my opinion, Arby's success in that work was above all due to his making our performances even and homogeneous, me, Mrs. Loretta, and an eight-year-old girl who played my child and who was acting for the first time.

**In an interview about that play, you said you tried to follow stage directions except in Act 3 at the end. Can you, so many years later, talk about your experience exactly as you remember it?**

Yes. I was referring to the scene of the mother's death in Act 3, with Mrs. Loretta's extraordinary performance as the corpse and the insanity of her daughter Mrs. Shannon, the character that I played. We didn't alter Mrs. Shannon's monologue at all, obviously, and never added to it or removed a single word or sentence. The author had not suggested any stage directions. The staging of that scene and the demonstration of madness and requisite behavior took shape in improvisation. Have you seen the photograph of that scene where I'm sitting on the mother's deathbed? The mother's corpse is in a seated position on the armchair facing

her daughter. Mrs. Shannon is weaving in and out of borderline madness and retreats to her childhood. The timeframe is constantly disrupted. I had to create two parallel characters within myself and duly communicate them, at once a young woman and a little girl. I didn't want to mimic insane people. Portraying madness in acting is very difficult; it is perhaps only by looking within that one can find a way to get close to it.

***The Sleeper's Den* reflects on death, the untimely death of the mother and the death of Mrs. Shannon's lover . . .**

The mystery of death has been treated in Arby's work time and again. In *Little Eyolf*, the young boy drowns at sea when the story begins, and with his death, the relationships between the characters in the story are turned upside down. In *Caligula*, with the sister's death, Caligula's inner core shatters. In *The Sleeper's Den*, the lover's death transfigures certain emotions, but it is the mother's death that is of paramount importance because a mother is by definition the link to the source of existence.

**It's death that makes the family decline further and compounds the pressure; it is an irrevocable sentence, as it were.**

We come into contact with death over and over in our lifetime, but we feel it literally only when someone passes away, for physical death is more intelligible.

At the end, having suffered her moments of madness, she [Mrs. Shannon] looks at the audience with muted eyes. I don't want to know the rational explanation of that moment because I myself have played it. But one can perhaps imagine that that stare no longer belongs to Mrs. Shannon but is the sensation of the presence of death that for an instant brings the audience into communion with itself through a small opening inside her.[48]

**What made you collaborate with Ovanessian when Crossroads (CRT) was founded?**

I felt my work with him was unfinished. The four of us didn't have a fixed place to work. To begin with, we used to rehearse in his house and later on at Bagh-e Ferdows. We regularly exchanged notes with one other about future work and programming.

*A Knight*/Savāri, which was based on old Iranian texts, was developed during that period and had its first performance at the Shiraz Arts Festival in Persepolis. Meantime, CRT, which Arby had conceived as a performance space and proposed to CT was completed.

**You rehearsed and performed in spaces not intended for theatre; what sort of experience did you gain from appearing in those unusual environments?**

At Bagh-e Ferdows, I found rehearsing *The Cherry Orchard* before an audience in daytime difficult because I could see them plainly and I was unable to isolate their presence from myself. I felt we were all in the same real space and time. Plus, the location felt much too real. But the nights we performed *Caligula* and *A Knight*/Savāri at Persepolis, I could only feel

[48] For a production review see Reza Azmi, "Har Shannon Yek Noqteh Ru-ye Khat-e Zaman." *Rastakhiz*, 4 Jan. 1977: 3; reprinted in Lashkari/*TC*: 876-880.

my presence and a connection with the audience. There was an invisible border between my world and their world. The silence in the surrounding desert, the moon in the sky above and its faint glow in space and on the faces of my fellow actors, as well, the stage lights spilling on the floor through the ruins of Tachareh's rock-carved portals at Persepolis brought me into a strange and mysterious communion, a communion that was related to a separate reality. In that reality, make-belief and the pretense of playing a role lost its meaning.

**Can you talk about group exercises and improvisations?**

We did a variety of exercises aimed at building harmony that were centered on working with bamboo sticks. There were exercises to produce musical sounds, exercises to make sound and voice function like musical instruments; open exercises and exploring physical possibilities; mirror exercises where the actors emulated one another's movements; getting to know, and using the body as a language and medium of stage expression; exercises with text; for instance, on the sound of letters and how they vibrate in the body, plus other exercises such as tai chi and yoga for balance, concentration, breathing, and distribution of energy. We were never idle. Our only vacation was for about a month and a half in the summer.

**So, the exercises helped you develop your acting skills?**

Yes. My theatre proficiency owes itself to working with Arby Ovanessian. Its principle foundation lay on his long years of research, experimentation, and toiling day and night. Many actors gave brilliant performances on the stage of Iranian theatre in his productions. Progress demands diligence, curiosity, and most importantly, the courage to take risks. His method for training actors and cultivating talent was an invaluable, necessary, and highly impactful service to Iranian theatre. Opining about his theatre productions and teachings is not easy because theatre has to be seen, and connected with, onstage. All that remains of his productions is certain memories and a handful of photographs and brochures, that is all.

## Sadreddin Zahed — *Actor*

Paris, winter 2010

**Before the foreign actors in *Orghast* arrived in Iran, what kind of work plan did Arby Ovanessian lay out for the Iranian actors?**

His plan was twofold. *One*: Enable the Iranian group to get to know each other and be able to work in unison through varied practices (body exercises, harmonization, voice, and rhythm; exercises with bamboo sticks, concentration of attention, sensory awareness, mirror exercises, scenic movement, improvisation, and so forth). *Two*: Prime the group so they could work toward ICTR's primary goals, which meant training in voice, non-verbal or vocal communication.

**You were involved in most TW productions and stayed on there. What was the attraction?**

One of the reasons was the prevailing discipline, which agreed with me very well. In Arby's

system, the actor was the generator of the scenes, and he, in effect, was the stimulator. He set up the right conditions and stimulated the actors so that their most vital sign, meaning their creative force, would pulsate and present itself onstage. He wanted a group that was diligent about body exercises, had presence of mind, and was energetic. That focus ensured the body was sound, primed, and agile. Soundness also applied to how we ate, walked, looked at things, and behaved. A religious tenet was operative, which is why it mattered to us to for instance keep our workspace and home clean and orderly. We even used to fold our clothes the same way on entering and place them in dedicated spots. I felt a heightened self-worth and serenity, as if someone else was speaking from within me.

**What kind of training did Arby offer the actors and what was his relationship to them?**

The first thing we did was get ready to exercise. Our routine was conducted like a ritual ceremony: silence, concentration, body exercises, voice and actor training were all inviolable elements of the method.

He created unique exercises to develop each play; for example, the anchor in *Caligula* and the approach to its production were different from Nalbandian's plays, so it had a distinct one. One type of setup comprised actors using a variety of exercises to try and theatrically embody the underpinnings of an author's thoughts.

**How did the exercises affect the productions, and were they pre-designed or a step-by-step process?**

Sometimes we did exercises that appeared unrelated to the production at hand. But in fact, they were conditioned to help that specific play take shape and be staged. For instance, in advance of *All at Once*/Nāgahan, we worked on the beats of religious ceremonies — mourning lamentations, chest-beating on Ashura, and so on. Some of the exercises were very simple; for example, we would chant a piece together, then he would ask us to recreate the rhythm of that piece by beating a bamboo stick against a cushion: *tak tak, tak tak, tak tak* — sounds associated with chest-beating. The idea was to find a stand-in or an image that induced an association with another image; the image had to be inspired by reality but not be reality itself.

**Did you use the rhythm exercise in the production of *All at Once*/Nāgahan**

Yes, indirectly. Because of the countless repetitions of those exercises, our play reading and delivery recalled the rhythm of chest-beating by association. The audience also sensed those rhythms in our dialogues. Not everything can be explained in words. It's like perfume where you get a whiff of the scent and then it's gone; it's not easy to put that into words.

**How would you describe your experience in *Self-Accusation*?** [49]

Finding the motivation behind such a text was extremely important, and the first step. Each

[49] See Theatre III, *Self-Accusation,* and Jamshid Chalangi, "Shenasandan-e Nahad-e Penhan va Zedd-e Akhlagh-e Adami." *Mardom,* 12 Jan. 1974.

repeated reading of the play prompted a revelation that sank in drop by little drop and added something new. Improvisations on sound and experimenting with the beat of the verbal cadence gradually helped shape the work.

**What was the play reading process in that work?**

We were not to form any opinions about the play but were to focus instead on words, commas, periods, sentence structure, and articulation. We couldn't see the end of the road at the start; we didn't know what places we would pass by and what turn of events to expect. We did exercises in silence where we ignored all previous developments. We listened to the sounds that had arisen from the text. All we had to do was be alert.

No interpretation was attempted in the early readings of the play.

**How did you experiment with the text of *Self-Accusation*? Various actions are continually repeated in that play, so my question is about your treatment of sound, high and low pitches, articulation of words and phrases, and the changes they underwent.**

In the next phase, we were aware of the relationship between the text, the words, the punctuation, and ourselves; we searched for what the playwright was trying to say and how those statements could be personified onstage. The play was written for a cast of two. At the start, our only path to connecting with the text was to read it exactly as it was written. We approached it like variations on a theme in music. Some of the verbs were in the past tense and certain adjectives were repeated over and over. We articulated each passage in the text with completely distinct rhythms. As the experiments settled in, we would speak the lines while running and control our breathing so that the beats would not disrupt and break up, and so we would be able to sustain the verbal beats. Arby's exercises were collective explorations. We built structures that we had not predesigned.

**You and Parviz Pourhosseini jointly played the role of Caligula. How did that come about?**

Arby wanted two actors to play Caligula, one night me, and one night, Pourhosseini. I really don't remember what happened that he told us both of you are going to play Caligula simultaneously.

**What were your rehearsals like in *Caligula* as a duo?**

While being one and alike, we also had to search for our dissimilarity. It was a difficult circuit. We would stand face-to-face; one would initiate a movement, the other would mirror it, and vice versa. We moved together. We tripped up together. We aped each other. We told jokes and tossed them around between each other. Those exercises seem simple and at the same time silly. But they had an amazing impact on shaping the work. In one of the rehearsals, when Caligula was murdered, a small music box fell out of Pourhosseini's pocket, popped open and played a tune. Right there, on the spot, I up and danced like a madman. It was a crazy dance and Arby said we'll keep; it's good. I never asked him, what does this dance mean? In such moments, the meaning of the theatre that emerges — the meaning of that inscrutable and invisible relationship — cannot be put into words.

**Why were some plays presented in open air and other spaces not built for theatre?**

He preferred presenting some of his works in uncommon spaces that particularly suited his production and the play. Such spaces were chosen with the quintessence of the play in mind. For instance, the performance space in *Vīs o Ramin* was highly compatible with sunset and was intertwined with Persepolis. In *All at Once*/Nāgahan, the brick structure of the Delgosha Pavilion in Shiraz and its alcoves connoted an old Iranian house with its small chambers and allowed the audience to watch the performance from all four sides. In *A Knight*/Savāri, Artaxerxes' recessed tomb in the mountain, connected as it was to the cube that was the stage-and-seating section and extended to the wide and open vista of the plateau below was very effective in giving form to the substance of the play.

**What did the experience of performing plays that were part of the TW repertory mean to you?**

The repertory gave the audience a chance to see several productions in a short time. Secondly, constant exertion and exploration prevented the actors from replication and from getting stuck in a groove and helped them evolve. Playing different roles over a week required physical, emotional, and mental fitness, which is the best actor training program.

**A repertory also lets you see different reactions to your work by different audiences in a short time.**

Yes, that does happen over the full run of the show. And it helped, as we got to continually analyze our work and had the option to make revisions in-between performances. It gave us a chance to perfect our work.

**What classes did the group offer at TW?**

Given the group's diverse experiences and what they had learned from body exercises and improvisation and other techniques, it made those practices available to interested youth. Two actors worked with the trainees in each class. The classes allowed us to put our learnings to the test; they placed the instructor in a position where they could see and evaluate themselves in the mirror that others held up to them.

The classes were focused on acting. All trainees supported the program and appreciated its many benefits for ensemble work. The syllabus was developed under Arby's supervision and implemented following collective approval.

**Was participation limited to TW members?**

No, some were drama students. Classes were free and had time limits. Some of the former trainees are currently theatre actors in Iran.

**How were plays that CPG and the CRT group performed selected? Did the actors share in the decision?**

Arby would propose plays and the final selection was made with the actors and the group's

conditioning and preparedness in mind. We then worked on the plays and tried them out.

***A Knight*/Savāri was not a scripted play but was developed in a creative process that involved five people. Please describe how it took shape.**

Although the play had a unified theme and subject, each element that took shape in the production recast the play's main subject in a new form, which I believe had deep roots in Iranian culture and traditions. Throughout the time we worked on the play, even on the plays that came before, we always tried to evaluate how closely the audience related to us. We acquired that knowledge mostly indirectly. In the case of *A Knight*/Savāri, some people proved unwilling to embrace that mold. The critics in particular did not move past their entrenched convictions; they dictated a certain kind of thinking, a certain kind of art. On the other hand, there were audiences who watched the performances with an open mind and without animus. We were never sure whether the questions that were raised, or the issues that came up in debates and discussions reflected real concerns, or whether impulses outside of the framework of drama production had provoked and drawn them out.

**What were the theatrical elements of the production?**

The movements and the actions were all theatrical. An extraordinary amount of body training had gone into that work. Our physical synchronicity was very expressive. Theatre becomes meaningful to the degree the actor is masterful.

**What are the obstacles to attaining mastery?**

Dishonesty, insincerity, lack of physical training, lethargy, and a lot of other things. In theatre, refinement is achieved through practice. We used to work on our body for hours, on every single finger, the eyes, nose, mouth, on our gaze, and so on. Our group used to try different methods. An actor's mental mastery is not attained overnight.

## Fereidun Yousefi — *Actor*

Tehran, winter 2012

**You were among the chorus of "Twelve Assistant Directors" in the television recording of *Research*/Pazhuheshi. What did you think of that production?**

For me, that production was not just a theatre event but an advent and a phenomenon. I remember it vividly, including Khogāshi's singing as I and a chorus of my friends hummed in the background.[50]

[50] Khogāshi is described by Nalbandian in his *Research*/Pazhuheshi as follows: "Slender youth. Poetic. Bewildered novice philosopher. Dressed in a white burlap shirt and long, black robe." He is one of eight principle characters in the play and sings a poem from Rumi's *Divan-e Shams* that begins with: *O beatific being / Why do you shun me?* and ends with: *Should sun-like you rise to Fourth Heaven high / I shall ride on your wings a shadow disguised.*

**Were you aware that Nalbandian's play had been submitted to the jury of the NITV/Shiraz Arts Festival Playwriting Competition?**

Nalbandian was my schoolmate and MY neighbor, and we had been friends since childhood. I knew about his writings. He talked very little; he rarely played with us. I didn't know he had submitted a play to the Television's playwriting competition. In 1968, I and Esma'il Khalaj and others who wanted to pursue theatre joined the *House of Youth*/Khane-ye Javanan. There, we met Iraj Anvar who had started working on Jean Genet's *Death Watch*. One day, Anvar said someone has sent a play to the TV that has confounded the jury and hasn't given his mailing address either. I asked for his name; he said Abbas Nalbandian. I told him he's my friend and went with Abbas to introduce him to Iraj Anvar, so a meeting could be arranged for him at the TV.

Before the TV recording of *Research*/Pazhuheshi, I had been working with Esma'il Khalaj; I related to his work, which was about everyday events in people's lives. But Nalbandian's play inhabited the whole world. In the words of one critic, "*Research,* the strange, savage, and outrageous play that premiered in Shiraz, shows that one can be at once from now and from ever, from here and from everywhere, and wait for Godot between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf."[51]

**How did you come to join TW as an actor?**

I played in *Prometheus* and in the *Seven Tales of Barsissa, the Pious* under Iraj Anvar. Then Arby chose me for *All at Once*/Nāgahan and I joined his group. We did body exercises starting at 9 AM, followed by two hours of practicing voice and breathing. Afternoons were dedicated to play reading, and evenings, to rehearsals. Those who had performances arrived at 7 PM; they spent an hour in silence and performed at 8 PM. TW was set up such that we managed everything ourselves, once a while, we even painted the place. We worked together in perfect harmony. The Workshop had come to feel like home.

Arby handed me the text of *All at Once*/Nāgahan, a play with a classic story but with an extraordinary and shocking turn and asked me to read Taqi's part. In the course of the rehearsals, we got to a point where we could communicate among ourselves without talking or having to explain.

**You were in different presentations of *All at Once*/Nāgahan: first, special exercises and previews at TW, then performances at the Delgosha Pavilion (Shiraz Arts Festival),[52] at CT (Tehran) [53] and at Nancy (France).[54] How did alternate spaces affect the relationship with the audience and the quality of the performance?**

Nothing in the mood and spirit of our acting ever changed, though some spaces like the Delgosha Pavilion in Shiraz added a richness to the work. That is where the performance

[51] Maurice Fleuret in the Sep. 1968 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

[52] Reviewed by Amir Taheri, "Ritual Theatre: Martyrdom and a Mélange of Languages: *All at Once . . .*" *Keyhan Int'l,* 3 Sep. 1972: 3.

[53] Reviewed by Janet Lazarian, "*All of a Sudden*, a Stranger in the City." *Tehran Journal,* 18 Mar. 1973: 7.

[54] For a review by a French critic see "'Nagahan' par le 'Kargah Nemayesh'." *Le Républicain Lorrain,* 4 May 1973.

reached its peak. I was seated on the edge of an alcove in the upper level of the building. We descended in turn and began to perform. Honestly, there were many moments when I felt transported; the performance would start, and the movements would manifest on their own, and I remember that during the final rehearsal the atmosphere was so charged that the actor who played the landlord could not stop crying at the end. At CT also, Arby's set, lighting, and stage design kept us in check. Audiences were stunned. Even at Nancy, although they didn't understand the language, the actors and theatre professionals among them scrutinized every detail. When the performance ended, absolute silence hung in the air for a good while before people slowly began to applaud.

**How did the presence of an audience affect the experimental performances at TW, and how would you qualify these special exercises?**

Performing special exercises before an audience helped us reach our desired goal. In those open rehearsals, Arby gave us such a sense of self-confidence and freedom that it was productive for the work process. Things would happen that could never recur. We kept some of the key movements and tried to look for and identify the sensation behind each; if a movement was meaningful, it would also connect with the audience. He let the actor search. Our challenges were not technical but mostly internal.

**What methods did the director use, and how did he help actors get close to their role?**

His method and his approach to actors varied in different plays.

**You mentioned that each rehearsal had its own life. What was special about the rehearsal of Act 3 in *All at Once*/Nāhagan?**

The rehearsal of Act 3 had gone on for an especially long time and taken on a life of its own. Rehearsing Fereidun's long soliloquy (played by Bijan Mofid) hadn't happened unaided. I'm not talking about his performance per se, I'm talking about the atmosphere — for the actors in the group had varying acting talents. For that atmosphere to evolve, the actors had of course started from the same source; without that fountainhead, we wouldn't have gotten there. It's true that Nalbandian's play made us feel strong, but that by itself wasn't enough; rather, the atmosphere that was forged by the group was the essential element that helped a lot. The director had recognized its importance and was able to transmit it to us in the rehearsals.

I played a twelve-year-old boy with a dove — a pair of white wings — perched on my hand that flapped nonstop throughout the play until the end when it came to rest on Fereidun's lifeless body. Such notions were very effective in channeling the text and its substance to the audience; the imagery communicated. The visualization of the whole play was multidimensional in the production.

Another scene that had a very powerful effect on me was when we were tearing off Fereidun's clothes to bury him.

**How did your collaboration with Arby compare with other TW directors you worked with**

**in terms of cultivating your acting skills, and how did it foster consistency in the quality of your work?**

Before working with him, I felt the same anxieties as any actor does when onstage for the first time — or even untold times — to deliver the dialogues he's learned by heart, and constantly stressing not to forget, to walk correctly, and so on. But when I worked with him, I found a key. That key gave me the power and the self-confidence to perform before audiences even without a script; not only that, but to even produce a script. That happened when years later, after he had left TW, we each decided to direct a play. Well, what was the source of my self-confidence? It was the result of working with Arby.

I did not feel restricted as an actor. Of course, the main blockings were kept intact in every performance but there was also a degree of leniency and flexibility, so the actor didn't have to duplicate his routines every time. That level of freedom was much more integral to Arby's work than when I worked with others.

We learned our lines simultaneously with the movements in the course of the rehearsals. With other directors, we used to first learn the lines, then rehearse the movements. The difference between his method and the other directors was unmistakable.

**Evidently, there was no pre-determined blocking in rehearsals; the director created the conditions for the blockings to take form. How did you help bring that creativity to fruition?**

I'm sure all the other directors at TW also allowed the actors to try out their ideas, but I believe that the opportunities they provided were not as tangible and special as his. The difference lay in the director's words, the transmission of knowledge, and feelings. With Arby, the transmission was much more internal. For instance, another director might say, 'Let's try this scene using improvisation and see what happens.' He would never make such a statement in his work. Improvising and trying out the play is what we did all the time. Of course, many individuals couldn't always tolerate that, not from the standpoint of theatre but because of the ordeal that the exercises exacted — the actual difficulties of that practice. A route leading up to rehearsing a play was navigated; it had its built-in preludes: body, voice, and breathing exercises, and concentration drills. I'm not saying other actors didn't do those things; many did; but there were also certain differences working with Arby.

**What did he look for in the actor?**

In essence, he looked for an internal acting power, not an external one. Some actors — newcomers who had just joined the group — didn't understand the need for those unusual exercises and the philosophy behind them. As a result, they couldn't put up with them, or with Arby's disposition, and they couldn't, or didn't want to accept his method in the exercises and the way the sense was communicated through play.

**How did he enable the actors' inner traits to appear and be expressed?**

The presence of this man as a director and the energy that he transmitted to the actor passed in total silence. During rehearsals, he sat on his knees until the exercise was over; and he rose

the same way, off his two knees. Of course, he sometimes stopped the work, said a few words; you have the gesture with his finger in your photographs. His explanations were not like: I'm telling you to do exactly this or that. No exaggeration, he never interfered in my work, but he would choose from among the things that happened, or he'd say, make sure you remember to keep this moment; don't lose it.

I don't know from where he pulled out that rabbit like a magician, but he did something that enabled me as an actor to extract meaning from the text I was working with.

**Why is it that after seeing *Caligula*, one of the Hungarians said to the actors that even when you have your back to each other, the inner drives of your characters interrelate?**

That incredible thing happened performing *All at Once*/Nāgahan at the Nancy Festival as well where we had that same level of self-confidence. In Wroclaw, *Miklós Jancsó* had presented his theatrical adaptation of the film, *Red Psalm*, at the festival. After our *Caligula*, a critic wrote in the bulletin, 'Given the Iranian production*, Jancsó better go back to making films.' His actors immediately arranged to meet us*; *each member of our group was surrounded by a few of theirs. I felt they were enthralled by something we'd done that at the time we didn't realize was so important. After five years of uninterrupted work, we had reached a point where even with our backs to each other, we were able to move in exactly the same form and spirit. That mastery grew out of Arby's concentration exercises and applied especially in Caligula, which my fellow actors enjoyed a lot and for which they worked very hard, though it looked deceptively effortless. That was the result of having exercised for so long. The group had worked closely together for about two or three years. Our interrelationships were such that we didn't see a need for explaining things to one another and most often a mere silent gesture was all we needed.*

**The common denominator between Caligula and your character, Sipio, was that both were poets.**

*Arby had an interpretation of Caligula that I hadn't had the first time I read the play*; *afterwards, I became aware of the two Caligulas and the representation of his two personalities, each of which betrayed a unique mentality. I had to face two Caligulas. During the rehearsals, while performing with these two personalities I felt that I liked one more than the other, that is, I was more comfortable with one of them though he had killed my father. That is Sipio and Caligula's common denominator. My relationship with Caesonia and the others had to do with circumstances that went back to another time, historically speaking.*

*For me, performing Caligula at Persepolis and at CT were two completely different experiences. At CT, the emotions were somewhat tangible and earthly, but in Persepolis, they were unfamiliar and strange, as if the event was happening right there. Both the distinct spirit of the site and Arby's design contributed to that feeling. I inhabited Sipio within the domain of Persepolis and did not relate to my fellow actors on a personal level*; *I believed in my identity and in my connection as well. When reading texts, Arby wouldn't let us emphasize our feelings, and the right thing always happened. When uttering words, it wasn't me expressing my feelings*; *it was the atmosphere that flowed through, liquid.*

**What was it like to perform *Caligula* in Caracas as an open-air chamber work with the audience encircling the players?**

*It was very moving. The fact is, the director had presented an international quality production abroad. With those performances, he had reached his goal. Many expressed their interest in having a closer collaboration with us outside the country.*

**Before the official run of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Caligula*, you had performances that advanced in tandem with improvisations/special exercises. Do you recall a particular one?**

*Yes. In Caligula, those improvisations brought me closer to Sipio, but in the exercises for The Cherry Orchard, the working method was altogether different. I had joined the group only recently. We performed the play in total silence while observing the duration of the dialogues. Chekhov's play moved me deeply during that special exercise and I realized what the production would mean to the audience. I remember my world had changed. It felt like now that I'm at a party as the post office secretary, I have a life behind that stage. Our house is over there, close to the cherry orchard. I liked the party and the music of Tchaikovsky that went with it. I took along my tape recorder every morning and enjoyed listening to that music before the rehearsals began.* Even when we were not in rehearsal, we stayed connected to our roles.

**Before the run of *All at Once*/Nāgahan at Nancy, what was the posture and position of the dissenters, including the Confederation?** [55]

When we started rehearsals in Nancy, a leaflet was distributed one night saying a group has come from Iran to participate in the festival and that it's a state-run theatre company. We paid no attention because, well, if the audience was to hurl tomatoes at us, it would be doing that later, during the actual performance. On the evening of our last rehearsal, some of those individuals watched our rehearsal in full. Before every show, no matter where, we used to sit in silence and concentration for an hour, rarely exchanging words, then we began the play; silence and concentration were integral to our performance, especially in works where sound was of the essence. I noticed that those same people were standing by the door and actually inviting everyone to be quiet.

The performance on opening night was very good; we weren't aware that Peter Brook was in the audience. When it was over, while talking to some of the audience, he said: This is not a Third World theatre. This is Theatre." In performing that play, gripped by the writing, the director's vision, and related exercises, we had reached a point where we could block out all external noise. For me, every night was a new experience and adventure; it was as if we had acted out all our mischief in complete freedom in our improvisations. Once a performance started, an air full of responsibility took over and I felt its weight on my shoulders.

I'm still in awe of those exercises, that era, and what happened to us in theatre during that period, TW, and our rehearsal room. Theatre occupied a very important place in our lives.

**When Ovanessian talks about theatre, it is as if he's relating a ritual, a presence, which is spontaneous, not predetermined — creating a condition, as it were, so the actor may con-**

[55] The Confederation of Iranian Students was a membership-based NGO active in Europe and the U.S. in the 1960s-1970s. During 1975, members of the increasingly radicalized organization lobbied hard in the West against the Shiraz Arts Festival and managed to dissuade several artists from participating in the festival's 10th anniversary program in 1976.

**nect with the unknown. The key lies in discovering that unknown and unveiling whatever is inside the actor. This issue cannot be resolved verbally by the director alluding to which path you should take to arrive. Instead, he gradually arranges certain happenings for the actors in the exercises.**

Exactly! Without exaggeration, acting in Arby's productions was like closing your eyes, taking a leap of faith and jumping off a cliff certain that when you land, you'll be alive and nothing bad will happen to you.

**How was it that he reassured you so?**

I think it's because there was no question that he left unanswered, whether in silence or in words. Ten years after I left him, I developed a different outlook on my relationship to people and to my social life; the reason is that I had experienced that period. That theatre — which I practiced in that group — will never be forgotten in my life.

We've forgotten a lot of things, but I remember many of the seconds.

*Man, Beast and Virtue* was a comedy. At twenty-six, I played a twelve-year-old, and I fully believed I was twelve: *There's a lot I don't understand. I'm stupid. My mother has been unfaithful.* All of that was real. My part had no dialogue, but I felt present through the whole performance. It was like a grand test. I attained that same state of presence in *All at Once*/Nagahan, and also in *Caligula* at Persepolis. This is the same sensation of free-fall I mentioned we had in a performance where we would take flight fearlessly and when the play ended, would land back on Earth. That state of acting is why *Jancsó*'s group showed such enthusiasm about our work in *Caligula* and why at Nancy the audience would keep silent for a while after *All at Once*/ Nāgahan ended so the atmosphere would not fade away.

**The audience had in fact walked the route along with the actors.**

Yes, like a trapeze artist that walks a tightrope constantly aware that he is at a great distance from the ground and there is no safety net below and he may take a fall any second and the fall may lead to his death. When a performer is unaware of why he's there, his death will come. That is where, in turn, the audience understands its responsibility.

# Theatre
# III

# Selected Interviews with Arby Ovanessian

## *Miss Julie: First Interview*

By Kambiz Ebrahimi, *Khoosheh Magazine,* 17-24 December 1967

**Your special field of study was cinema; what led you to take up theatre?**

I was drawn to theatre from early on, and thanks to theatre, I discovered things that became the building blocks of my work in cinema.

To me, theatre represents 'death,' because its every passing moment is lost for good, whereas cinema is the epitome of 'life,' whatever lends itself to repetition and resurrection is preserved and can relive again.

Basically, I find life meaningful to the extent that I understand death, and since cinema and theatre represent this polarity most effectively, I've embraced both at once and pursue them in parallel.

**To what extent do you believe theatre has a social responsibility?**

That varies in different contexts. For instance, the first responsibility and duty of people who work in theatre in Iran is to educate the public about the multifaceted qualities of this art form. Before we develop a general understanding of theatre in Iran, it's impossible to say what kind of theatre we need, one rooted in our customs, traditions, and environment or a theatre that has been handed to us from the West? Contemporary theatre has reached us fully formed. Much time has passed since the days when theatre had a rudimentary form and was restricted to rites and rituals.

Also, a theatre production cannot have the same significance for all audiences.

**What criteria guide your selection of plays to produce?**

As I mentioned, what interests me in theatre is death, meaning I take theatre as a symbol of death and therefore select plays that address death broadly speaking, from spiritual to material. One can get more out of life by getting closer to death. Of course, in my preference for this theme, I'm not partial to any particular style or order.

**How would you describe the art of directing?**

Because theatre is a visual art form, the director ought to have a fairly strong gravitation to visual language. The questions that are posed in a play, besides being presented through the actors' words, should be conveyed to the audience indirectly by means of images that can be created onstage; for example, the images that I created in *Miss Julie* were totally congruent

with the text of the play. Using movement, color, and stillness, the various characteristics of Strindberg's oeuvre, from naturalism in *The Father* to expressionism in *A Dream Play,* acquired a visual expression.

I reject the kind of acting that has become prevalent in theatre in Iran, which is to say an unnecessary focus on the actor and dismissal of other important factors in theatre. I don't undermine the actor, but I do believe that low-key, poor acting is better than over-the-top, dramatic, specious deliveries. A character's internal turmoil and perturbation can be expressed by changing the color of their wardrobe in the course of the performance, and by their actions and movements; such visual tools will be effective if they establish a direct, credible, and logical connection to the dialogue and to the psychological make-up of characters in the play.

**What kind of a theatre director do you consider to be unqualified?**

A director who doesn't know why they find theatre interesting in the first place, meaning a person who doesn't know himself. A director's work has merit when he/she can bring a play's invisible and unknown dimensions to light.

**To what extent do you explain the contents of a play to your actors?**

To the extent of their capacity, meaning that when grasping and accepting a question may shock the actor, I prefer to keep it muted and try to induce the appropriate state of mind in them indirectly. And if I find that an actor has the capacity to grasp and accept the subtext of a play, I explain it to them thoroughly as best I can. Of course, I'm only referring to complex and abnormal psychological states.

**What do you think of Iranian plays?**

I haven't seen any that I've liked.

**What do you think of theatre critics and their responsibility?**

Obviously, a critic's standards and knowledge ought to be more advanced than the society's so that they can relate what there is to what ought to be. Explaining and unraveling the hidden dimensions of a work is what makes the critic equal in value to the artist. Critics have to be able to mentally disengage from past influences that have shaped them, avoid following established norms, and not try to look for their personal understanding and preferences in a performance. I'm talking about critics who aren't tied to specific political ideologies.

**What is the state of our theatre today, and what do you plan to do about it?**

It's in a state of experimentation and self-discovery; I can't comment on the future other than to say that every effort, whether right or wrong, is a step toward self-knowledge and progress. Personally, in line with I said earlier, I will continue to work in theatre whenever there is an opportunity. I believe that if a highly personal work has merit, its impact and relevance will be universal. Given that axiom, my first and foremost task is to produce work that satisfies me personally.

## *A Few Words with the Director of Research/Pazhuheshi*

By Nader Ebrahimi, *Book Review*, no. 2, June-July 1968

**Arby Ovanessian, what do you think of Nalbandian's play? How did it affect you the first time you came across it?**

Exactly as I staged it. I saw enough theatrical potential in Nalbandian's text. I felt it had the potential for a modern (post-1950) theatrical language — which is almost a return to the origins and essence of theatre, a sort of conscious repetition and ritual performance. Conscious reflection, conscious movement, in a word, conscious make-belief. In Nalbandian's play everybody performs, exaggerates, playacts, chats about this and that, and all of it consciously.

**Arby, do you know Persian well, enough to grasp and feel all the verbal and linguistic points and undertones of Nalbandian's text?**

I know Persian. I used Nalbandian's text more like a music score, the kind of music that is meaningful in its totality. When my actors asked about the exact meaning of a phrase, I'd ask them not to think about it. Voice it, but with a similar phrase in mind that is easier to understand.

**Could you figure out the meaning of those phrases?**

Of course. Nalbandian was always with us and whenever I asked for clarification, he answered. But I was chiefly concerned with the overall meaning. Only when there was an error in articulating or pronouncing a word or phrase, I'd ask for his help.

I wanted for a relation to be established between the tangible and the intangible — through theatre, of course. Mind you, I'm talking about theatre in its primitive sense, as in dancing around a sacrificial object, for instance, and the sounds that issued from the participants' mouths on such occasions. Those sound fragments had no meaning by themselves yet undoubtedly denoted a specific concept in the aggregate, for there were differences between festive ceremonies and mourning rituals.

Thus, for me, all the individual sounds and phrases and themes of the play were subsumed in a structure and induced a general mood. My aspiration was for the audience to have the same experience at the end of the performance that I did when I first came across the text.

**Arby, would it be correct to say that Nalbandian's play presented a "mystery" to you? I mean, were you facing the same problem that is presented in the play?**

Yes, that's correct. Of course, it was a metaphysical and gnostic mystery. Not that Gnosticism is humanity's salvation — that subject is broached in the play as well. But there's no doubt the author poses his problem in a mystical vein.

**Mystical or religious?**

In my view, gnostic. But if you believe it's somewhat akin to a religious spirit, you better talk to Nanlbandian.

*Nalbandian*: I can't distinguish between religion and mysticism. I say metaphysical. That's all.

**Arby, are you at all familiar and affiliated with our mysticism and Sufism?**

With your mysticism specifically, no. But I'm familiar with our mysticism and I don't believe there's a great deal of difference between them. I think it's the consciousness of a "mystery" that gives birth to mysticism and/or religion, you know what I mean? Not "solving the mystery" but consciousness of its existence. Knowing there is a mystery. We had a poet — in the 10th century — called Narek. He composed a long and extensive poem called the *Book of Lamentations*: *Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart,* a series of mystical soliloquies that comprise a conversation between a human being (the poet) and God and address the cleansing of sin and evil through a personal experience. The book breaches its religious boundaries and arrives at a universal human awareness. It's not about a specific religion anymore. It's pure gnosis.

**I turn to Nalbandian who is sitting quietly, seemingly paying no attention to our conversation, and ask him, *Nalbandian, do you have anything to say about this*?**

**And the response:** After I wrote the play and passed it on, my job was done. I thought it had nothing to do with me anymore; it's separated from me.

**How much time has passed since this play was written?**

About a year and a half.

**Have you re-read it since it was finished, I mean recently?**

Yes, I have read and have heard and have also written.

**And you still value it as you did initially?**

What value? Did I ever talk about its value? I didn't believe in values and don't. But my view of it hasn't changed.

*Arby*: I believe Nalbandian poses the question because he has to. Meaning he needs that. It's not about values and preserving those values.

**Arby, didn't you value any of the characters in this play over and above the others?**

No, but I gave more "weight" to the twelve assistant directors. I gave them a bigger role. Of course, I liked some characters better than others, but liking is not the same thing as valuing.

**Which one did you like best?**

The one that sits onstage before the performance begins and is not in the text itself.

**Why?**

Because it's the beginning. It's the start, the start of a path and a movement. It's opaque and undefined. And maybe he's the one who multiplies into eight and becomes "Everyman".

**Humanity!**

Maybe.

**Nalbandian, which of the characters did you like best?**

Ākhsheig and Khogāshi. [1]

**Why?**

Because the job of both is to destroy.

**So, you, Arby, know the characters. That contradicts your earlier statement.**

That's not true. Naturally, I've come to know them, but not as a goal, rather on account of their logic. I repeat, my goal is to exercise the logic of theatre, just as music has its own logic.

**Nalbandian, do you feel alienated from this work at all?**

I only wonder how I wrote it.

*Arby*: I've said the same thing. I wonder how I staged it.

**Arby, had you given any thought to audience reaction?**

I thought they'd like it. I thought everybody would like it because it is a mystery for everyone. I mean everything that transpires in their own lives as well, in their being and continuity, in their advances and goings around in circles. In every moment of their lives.

**Arby, why did you eliminate the cave?**

I think a cave trivializes the question in its external form. I had two interpretations of the cave. One, a confined, closed space, which I showed with a circle and what was suspended from above. The other, a ring of light to shine from above, that is, an opaque light that does not illuminate the space. I had that on the stage as well. But a cave as a wall had conceptual

[1] Ākhsheig is described by Nalbandian in his *Research*/Pazhuheshi as follows: "Young. Tall. Aggressive. A simple soldier who's been duped. Dressed in a simple, old, and very baggy uniform. An empty holster on the right of his midriff. On the left of his midriff a very long sword that reaches to the floor." For a description of Khogāshi see Theatre II, fn. 144. For the derivation of both their names see Theatre IV, fn. 161.

limitations. For Nalbandian's cave to be closer to its Platonic sense, I made the circular area on the floor out of aluminum, like a mirror, so the actors would be replicated and the idea that we are shadows would become clearer. So, people stand on top of themselves. But a cave as a physical entity has no metaphysical significance.

*Nalbandian*: You talk of Plato's cave. I didn't have such a cave in mind at all and hadn't thought about it. Even the cave of the *Seven Sleepers*[2] wasn't on my mind for the set. I just wanted to show confinement and being bound on all sides and closed in.

**Thank you.**

## *Vīs o Ramin*

By Nader Ebrahimi, *Shiraz Arts Festival Catalogue,* 1970[3]

**Let me begin by wishing you further success. I came to know your work through your production of *Research into the fossils of the 25th geological era* which was staged during the festival in 1968. You appeared to me as a dramatist that thinks and perhaps one who is fascinated by form. Is it another opportunity for formal exercises that has attracted you to *Vīs o Ramin*?**

I do not accept your statement that I am fascinated by form. We should see what content the form is meant to serve. If you mean that the text of the play was for me no more than a means through which I could give life to my preconceived and favourite forms, you are being unjust. But if you mean that the play's spirit has given me the possibility of presenting it in a suitable form I will be inclined to agree. Like *Research into ...* the play I am now directing, *Vīs o Ramin* has such an aspect.

**You mean to emphasize that form is not just a cover for the content, that it cannot be imagined separately and as an abstraction?**

Yes. For me a good text is one that is at harmony with what is within me. Thus, form can have no abstract or independent meaning, it is interwoven into the content, dissolved in it. It should be like that.

***Vīs o Ramin* is an almost classical text and a purely lyrical one. What did you find in this text that can be described as at harmony with what is within you?**

This play, and I say this without any selfishness, has the same spirit as Nalbandian's play. When you read the text your first reaction would be, "this is unactable". You should look at scenes which change almost every instant and there are several uninterrupted changes of the

[2] In the Quran (18: 9–26), the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* are known as the "People of the Cave" (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*).

[3] Amir Taheri's English translation of the interview by N. Ebrahimi, reproduced verbatim, omitting the names of the interviewer/interviewee at the beginning of each Q&A. Tr

sets. When I see a text like this, I know that the author has not imprisoned himself within rules and regulations, that he has not been scared by "principles and definitions". I feel that he has mastered a kind of liberation and freedom. I too feel for freedom, but my feeling does not take a direction opposite to that of the play's meaning, it takes the same direction in order to realize its objectives. As far as your description of the play as "almost classical and purely lyrical" is concerned I must ask whether after you have seen the play staged you would still feel that it has strictly personal attributes? In my opinion Ms. Tajadod's text does not have a traditional heart nor does its lyricism transcend certain narrow limits. Instead, she has brought up problems that we have to face any time and under any conditions of life. Our "Vīs" is no longer just a lover, a beautiful woman, a Leila or a Shirin.

**I have also noticed another problem: that of repeating the forms. Don't you think that you are still influenced by the successful forms you used in *Research...*? I think that you have returned to a previous successful experiment, limiting your work to it without taking any risks. Don't think that I have forgotten your points about form. What I am referring to is what any spectator would notice at first sight, for example your use of a chorus, a geometrical circle and chains.**

I don't believe that I have repeated anything. All that we have here is a certain kind of dramatic point of view. It is obvious that if a director has a thesis, he remains faithful to it. Let me use your own examples. There are people who when reading the play "Fog fills the stage" immediately think how, indeed, this could be shown on stage. They will try to communicate with the inner meaning through an image. There are other people who would see and feel an image without having it in front of their eyes; it is enough for them to be invited to do so. I belong to the latter group. I don't see any need for filling the stage with some artificial fog so that I can believe and accept that the fog has done its duty as specified in the text. It is sufficient for me that a voice should say "Fog fills the stage" in an independent, powerful and inviting manner. The spectator would then see the stage filled with fog because he has been invited to do so. That, of course, presumes thinking on the part of the spectator. We have, of course, a similar sentence in Ms. Tajadod's play. It is "We bring the voice of the storm to the stage". This bit, like others, is reserved for the chorus. They speak the non-objective storm, that is assumed to be objective, in dramatic language. Faced with this storm they smash the existing order replacing it by a new one. This is because each process has its own specific order. So, you can see that I have only applied my point of view, that I have not repeated a form. It is the same with the "circle". When you wish to put members of a group at equal points of distance from a person or an object you cannot avoid the circle. The circle had another significance in Nalbandian's play. At times Vīs is the centre of all dialogues and events; so, we place her at the centre of a circle, placing others at equidistant points from her. What happens? A circle is created with a point at its centre. As the play develops and this balance is disturbed by events the geometrical form of our circle is also disturbed. There is a scene in which Ramin enters the gaol from a window that is "as deep as the sea towards light" to see Vīs. We also have Vīs' nurse who is by her side. Here, because the nurse has an important role to play, we are faced with a triangle. In fact, our geometrical form could vary in accordance with the distance or the closeness of the characters and the needs of the content. It could be circle, square or anything else.

**So, one can say that employing such forms would save the playwright and the director from**

**extra explanations thus making the work more compact.**

That is right. I must also add that there is yet another reason for placing Vīs at the centre of a circle. It is the movement Vīs makes for reaching unity. First there is complete lack of liberty-the gaol and the chains- and then there is expansion, dissolution and unity. Let me give you another example. Every now and then I have kept a needed accessory off stage. I have considered the accessory or the object unnecessary, thinking that the spectator can easily imagine that object through an imagistic movement. For example, a woman is savouring the perfume of a flower. The flower itself is a transitory being, its permanence lies in its allusiveness. The flower itself is not important; it is its meaning that counts. Therefore, isn't an expressive and logical move sufficient for showing the flower? Of course, this is not something new that I have discovered; but it is quite logical and acceptable. Why should we allow an "extra" on the stage? You feel that the woman on stage has smelled a flower, when no special kind of flower as far as colour and shape are concerned is required. Or, you could feel that a man on the stage has shot an arrow. You don't need to feel the presence of the thing itself. When Ramin shoots an arrow, the arrow is not seen and then the nurse shows the invisible arrow to Vīs. I can even say that there the presence of a real arrow would undermine the wider meaning we intend from the arrow. What is meant here is that a man is burning with the desire to enter Vīs' prison from very far away. Leaving the symbolic aspect of the question aside the shooting of a real arrow into the prison would turn the event into one that is far less significant and limited to an objective realism. This, of course, was not our aim. On rare occasions, however, I have allowed an object on the stage. These objects impose their presence upon us, that is to say that an object assumes the function of depicting a variety of roles. One such object is the golden chalice. The chalice, although apparently no more than an object, imposes itself visually because it assumes different functions. At one point, Vīs drinks the "Hoam" from it, at another point she drinks from it when taking an oath. Yet again the King uses the chalice for drinking wine. There is a unity among the various uses of the chalice while the object is seen under three different circumstances. Would it be possible to convey this without the presence of a real chalice? I wonder.

**In one scene Vīs should pass through the fire. Instead, you make the fire pass through Vīs. What is the significance of this opposite direction?**

Obviously, I have tried not to make any move without a reason. Vīs believes that she has the right on her side. She has not committed any sin. She is so pure; indeed, she is purity and truth itself, that she, representing truth, is not facing a trial; it is the trial that has to face the truth in utter humility. I am referring to the trial of passing through fire to prove Vīs' innocence. Thus, it is the fire that must pass through Vīs. In other words, the very meaning of truth does not admit of trial. It is the trial that has to undergo a trial. So, I show this exactly as it should be.

**At times acting appears highly artificial. The spectator is made uneasy by actors who are acting so much. He does not go to the depth of the play; he sees images that are like miniatures, as if there were no perspective, no dimensions, and as if acting were an end in itself.**

You are right. On various occasions you see that the actors are really making a play while being aware of their own existence as actors. You can detect this either through the slow pace of their movements or through their gesticulations. But that is not all; they have found life in

their acting and live in their acting. It is for this reason that every now and then the actors feel or pretend that they have reached the final point. Enough of playing, the game is up. They refuse to continue, as if the play had ended. But existence is still there, and life can assume fresh meaning from a question, an encounter, a new move or even a glance. Thus, work is resumed from the point where it had apparently ended; it is not possible to stop. Let me cite another example. In one scene Vīs' mother is wailing with disheveled hair. She suffers, and Vīs passes through the fire and is proved innocent. Isn't this an ending point? It is. And it is for this reason that Mother takes her crown off and returns it, as if she were behind the stage and the play were at an end. But she does not move. Then Mother faces Vīs and Vīs fixes her eyes upon her. This means that Vīs still is. So, nothing has ended, the play should go on. Mother then faces the audience and says, "We return and repeat the time from the beginning until tonight." And yet there is no real repetition, time does not repeat itself, it only continues. In fact, three is no time so that it can be repeated; it is we who give meaning to time through our continuity. It is in this continuity that truth is, eventually, revealed to the extent that such revelation is possible. It is for this that at the end of the play Ramin is still waiting for Vīs at the starting point. A conflict has been resolved, but others remain.

**Finally, what made you decide to stage your play at Persepolis? What could Persepolis add to *Vīs o Ramin*? What contribution could it make to its better understood?**

At Persepolis I have employed the element of real time. The play moves ahead in step with real time and when the sun sets at Persepolis the actors appear like shadows. Furthermore, Persepolis helps to evoke historical memories. Thus, the historical existence of the characters can be better felt. Let me venture a remark that will leave the door open for many future discussions. This play, this *Vīs o Ramin*, is a re-creation of *ta'ziyeh* in its true sense; perhaps it is nothing but *ta'ziyeh*. *Vīs o Ramin* belongs to the pre-Islamic era. During the Islamic era it admitted into itself a number of changes that enabled it to continue up to the present day. Because of its need for continuation, it admits fresh changes again. *Ta'ziyeh*, if it lacks a living dynamism, will cease to be what it aims at being. *Ta'ziyeh* should face the time and realize a harmony with our needs. Thus, *ta'ziyeh* has undergone many changes through the past and is still bound to do so. It is forced to do so because otherwise it will lose its traditional values and be turned into a habit. In other words, a permanent traditional element encounters temporary and non-traditional elements enabling the *ta'ziyeh* to continue. *Vīs o Ramin* is such a *ta'ziyeh*.

## *Self-Accusation*

By Borzou Mehrangiz, *Tamasha*, 30 March 1972

**In *Self-Accusation*, one is first and foremost struck by a noticeable contradiction. Contradiction and opposition to everything. How do you explain that?**

Perhaps it's the consequence of an unfulfilled wish or expectation, or a situation where existing solutions aren't satisfactory, and conflict may allow the truth and the hidden meanings to come to light. Contradiction is a form of thinking. Therefore, in this play, and from the perspective of Peter Handke and others whose thinking is based on such a pattern — from East to West — what is pointed out directly, what is accepted or rejected, is not the point in

and of itself. The objective is the outcome of this encounter.

**Contemporary works of art lack established standards. How would you describe *Self-Accusation*, which is a new approach to playwriting?**

If we agree that writing/playwriting is about establishing relationships, then achieving that goal needs a new language. We know there is something out there, and until we find the means to making that unknown, known — I call it finding the "form" — we use a variety of existing models, in the broad sense of that term. As a result, in one intellectual tradition, playwriting has turned into storytelling. Storytelling uses an invisible movement in the story, in principle indirectly, to elicit an effect and reveal the hidden. Contemporary playwrights have been less successful in using the story to allow the actor to give a genuine performance. This shortcoming, this poverty of language, is the reason why the invisible does not come to light. From the start, Handke has accepted the principle that what needs to be expressed, that which is invisible, is hidden inside every individual, and in this particular case is hidden inside the actor.

**Positioning four actors onstage who begin and end an action simultaneously with the performance, is that to emphasize the sense of "becoming" that's in the play?**

I should point out that these four individuals were added to the play in our production. In the original play, the text is supposed to be exchanged freely between two people — a man and a woman — as it unfolds. The role of these four individuals will gradually change over different performances and once we're able to fully articulate the play, we may eliminate these visuals and points altogether. The purpose of using these four individuals was to generate, or give theatrical form, to interaction. In such a setting, the actor will search for the unknown with the help of the text; naturally, the unknown will change from one performance to the next depending on the nature of the encounter. But the communication mechanisms and the space are the same. The day we are able to reveal the unknown in the two main characters — who use the text — the audience will no longer need guidance and these four individuals will naturally be eliminated from the performance.

**The actions of these four makes it feel like we're in a workshop.**

True; meaning surfaces in the outcome of the action.

**It appears you have been focused on the text's sound and its music. What was the thinking behind that?**

Because the play wants to articulate through acceptance and rejection, we did the same thing with the text by improvising in rehearsals. So, we used words in ways that were against our routine, forms of expression that were less familiar, the result of going back to the sounds that are anchored in the letters. In some segments of the play, we succeeded in finding rhythms and sounds capable of revealing the world hidden in letters and words and phrases; in other segments we're still in the search process. The outcome will depend on the extent to which, given this text, we (director and two actors) are capable of revealing what is hidden in us.

**How would you characterize Handke's disaffection with current theatre in *Self-Accusation*? And to what extent does that concern you?**

Handke's disaffection with current theatre is like a son's disaffection with a father. A natural and human disaffection that carries the secret of growth within itself.

**Only two or three sentences can be heard in each section; I believe this is both the writer's intention and yours. What were you after?**

When the unknown finds the right current, it naturally cannot fit in a known mold. And those are the moments where we grasp something in this production without really being able to follow the sentences word-for-word. In a way, when sounds and rhythms flow in step with sentences, there's no need for us to hear the words in a recognizable form to grasp the meaning. At that point, the rhythms automatically transform into meanings.

**In a way, *Self-Accusation* seems to be a statement about the limits of an individual's capacity to absorb.**

Yes, that's what I referred to when I said we know the world with the help of the human brain and that the brain's capacity is limited to the extent of our knowledge, but we're always aware that an unknown part of the world has held over. In his writings, Handke's aim is to point out this unknown part of the world; he is constantly aware that knowledge gets its measure from a reservoir that springs from the brain. That is when the need to apply the illuminating system of contradiction arises, acceptance and rejection.

## *All at Once*/Nāgahan: *A Breeze that Brings Me to Tears*

By Behnam Nateqi, *Ayandegan*, 2 Feb 1972

### *A Play about Sensitivities*

**The young playwright Abbas Nalbandian wrote *All at Once*/Nāgahan two years ago. Ovanessian who caused a firestorm with his production of Nalbandian's first work, *Research*/Pazhuheshi, is presenting this play at the Shiraz Arts Festival.**

Arby says:

*All at Once*/Nāgahan mixes reality and allegory. Islamic traditions and rites have penetrated the depths of the play and its real and palpable characters are each an allegory of fictional, surreal, historical . . . personalities. The story unfolds during Ashura — the anniversary of a religio-historic tragedy that cradles a special emotional charge for people that inhabit the Islamic cultural sphere.

The moments of an event that unfolds in a house and one that had occurred in another time (the deaths of Fereidun and Hossein) become associated. A theatrical situation for the purpose and in the sense that every theatrical situation is kind of a reconstruction of real life, or present life, that attests to an occult life and the past.

On the surface, *All at Once*/Nāgahan is a realistic drama, but at its core, it's an allegory, an allusion.

**The difference between *All at Once*/Nāgahan and Nalbandian's other plays doesn't lie only in its realistic form but in its inner integrity, in-depth integrity, intellectual integrity, and visual integrity. In this play, the dialogue is musical — like poetry — and image-laden. In this production, Ovanessian has put a lot of emphasis on the verbal beats, and on imagery. As with his other works, he's chosen simplicity.**

A very simple production, a production that tries to speak indirectly, not by mimicking reality, a production that is heavily centered on, that emphasizes, prosody, verbal rhythms, poetry and music. As for movement, most of our natural movements are imbued with innuendo and allusion. The movements of the production are likewise rich with innuendo and allusion, just like natural movements.

**Among all the tenants in that house, Fereidun is the only figure that doesn't even have a realistic appearance.**

He speaks differently, and because he speaks differently, he feels differently, he understands differently. One could in fact say that the play is about sensitivities, about assorted sensitivities that at one point, unify. Sensitivities that collect next to one another and each is a sign of a situation where naturally, to create, transform, change, or to effect change . . . they destroy something — a life, where it is not clear at all that what is destroyed is more valuable than what is gained.

There is an illusion in Fereidun's character, and that illusion could be indicative of a superior reality, or an inferior reality . . . That's why the similarity of his martyrdom to the martyrdom of Imam Hossein on Ashura appears as a coincidence; but every coincidence might be a sign of other orders, depending on how we perceive coincidences and what criteria we use to present them. The production aims to merely allude to this similarity, not underline or imitate it.

***All at Once*/Nāgahan is a deeply Islamic play, not outwardly so and not at the level of mere simulation; Islamic tradition is woven into its fabric. But while Ovanessian has made perfect use of the external manifestations of Islamic culture, he hasn't tried to copy them.**

No emphasis has been placed on Islamic traditions. But we do note some similarities: the beat of chest-beating ceremonies is employed, for instance, without being an exact copy. Images that may imply Islamic tenets are used, but they don't operate at that level per se, because the play itself doesn't want to present them directly; like two parallel lines of a ladder that at times get connected by a step.

A reality emerges of its own accord, indirectly, and by way of people's shared culture. It's natural that when the play is performed by Iranian actors and the text is in their own language that point is understood, but there's no need for us to highlight it.

**Ovanessian, a director that many consider a formalist, has tried to find a sensory-rational**

**form with the aid of his actors.**

The work has been rehearsed numerous times with varying sensibilities as open special exercises before audiences. Gradually, the best ones or a selection of them that could interrelate will be performed, and it may be months before the work finds a fixed form, a final, complete form. In the group, we have settled on a principle: In terms of sensibilities, we are going to leave any changes in sensibilities to happen on their own over time. The work may mature further, or it may remain at this level.

**In *All at Once*/Nāgahan, an artistic triangle, as they say, has emerged, an indirect triangle. At the third angle stands a tremendous dramatic talent, one who commands the lifeblood of theatre, Bijan Mofid. Ovanessian, with perfect intelligence, unearths all of Mofid's theatrical capabilities and puts them to use: the reach and gravity of his voice, the suppleness of his body, his special physique and countenance, and his command of the stage.**

Bijan Mofid's sensitivities, and his capabilities by comparison with the rest of the group, in the sense that all the sensitivities that we needed for Fereidun's character were more authentic in him — spurred our collaboration and allowed it to continue. As I said, we're more interested in making a sort of allusion to the reality of the production than to imitating reality.

**He points out something interesting about collaboration among the group.**

On the other hand, from the day TW was founded, the goal was to make it possible for individuals interested in theatre to collaborate and consequently for a harmony to emerge — meaning it's possible to create works with people who have divergent tastes and honest theatrical sensibilities. We pursue a more long-term vision. That is different from the old idea of theatre according to which stars perform, or actors turn into stars. We have undertaken a completely group-centered work, and the outcome is the outcome of group work.

**Ovanessian has tried to establish a specific relationship with the spectator. He calls this relationship:**

. . . a naturally theatrical relationship . . . such that any time an event occurs before the spectator's eyes it attests to a deeper event or signals a living current that in the end transforms into a communion between the moment that is shared by the actors and the moment that engulfs the spectator. A kind of solidarity, conceptually . . . shared silences, shared cries, and shared sorrows.

**I ask Ovanessian, *Isn't that mysticism*? He neither says yes nor refutes, but it is indeed mysticism, and an authentic kind of mysticism — a contemporary kind of mysticism. It's the same in Nalbandian's text as well.**

What can these things mean? I don't believe theatre has anything to do with meaning at all. Meaning blossoms by itself. Through theater, we contrive a means for meanings to blossom. Because theatre always proceeds in a fluid time, our greatest effort is to transport its fluid and dynamic time to a dimension so beyond time that we all, unwittingly, come to share in the

meaning. Whoever has had this experience recognizes it instantly, and whoever hasn't, will not get anywhere through debate and discussion. There is an advent, an instance, where you transcend yourself. That is due to the theatrical elements that the actors have put in the play from their inmost being. They have caused that instant to be shared with the spectator. That advent is meaningful by itself — it's the inner solidarity within the group that allows others to share in that phenomenon. The idea is to be able to signal the maximum with the minimum.

## *The Cherry Orchard*: *City Theatre Inaugural Program*

Parviz Eslampour, *Tamasha*, 31 January 1973

**Why Chekhov?**

Because he's among the few writers whose theatrical oeuvre has nothing to do with plot and overt dramatic issues; it's characterized by special kinds of sensibilities and signals that in my view constitute the foundation of theatre in the broad sense of the term. A kind of art that alludes to reality indirectly. It doesn't draw conclusions, it observes, it implies, it remembers, forgets, remembers again, and doesn't know!

I always wished I had a chance to work on Chekhov with an ensemble because it can't succeed with individualistic actors. When CPG was formed, I chose Chekhov as our first project; the core group was assembled from different theatre groups.

**Theatre to be read or to be seen and heard?**

Theatre is a connection that must needs be made in person; essentially acting and the performance should aim to find the common thread among those present. Acting isn't about impersonating other people but about absorbing the shared moments among different people. In a way, like my description of Chekhov's theatrical principles, acting is allusion. In my view, allusion is a relationship with an unknown that may sometimes be quite self-evident, in fact. For example, an individual walking about the stage is a performance. A performance of what? That's theatre.

**Do you mean that question itself is what makes theatre?**

The action itself is the outcome of the performance; it's the outcome of the relationship between that person walking and me. By me, I mean a spectator. So, that person walking in a specific situation and its outcome establishes a relationship with me.

**Your various experiences, from Beckett to Chekhov.**

Both writers talk with the past, or talk about the past, and the objective of both is the present, which is what theatre is about. Both have experienced certain intensities, but they don't want to recreate those intensities; instead, they broach and present the issue by way of mystery, poetry, and allusion. I don't believe Beckett is speaking of the absurd. Creation is the antithesis and the negation of the absurd. Chekhov, too, by pointing out stillness and silence and death,

is talking about life and memories of life. I can distill *The Cherry Orchard* into one sentence: "An orchard is sold and its owners trade places with others." In principle, it's a transition, unimportant on the surface. But from Chekhov's viewpoint, this simple issue becomes the mystery of life.

**When you say transition, does that mean change, growth, or something else?**

Chekhov doesn't know; he observes and insinuates. The whole difficulty in reading or producing Chekhov lies in interfering with and judging his actual plotlines. Because to read anything into them is to be at cross purposes with him.

**So, if you were to promote Chekhov someday, your description would have to be neutral?**

He's done that himself. He's called *The Cherry Orchard* a comedy — the play ends in death. That's a real comedy. And one can see it repeated everywhere.

**Attending to the emotional and rational predicaments of the characters in *The Cherry Orchard* and then attaining a collective tragedy, stillness, or growth in a kind of love that is reinforced by "departure"?**

What we achieved was the outcome of interactions among the whole group that were prompted by Chekhov's play and by the conditions that I had created for the work. Naturally, my views as I worked with the actors changed, became more fertile, and at times remained perhaps at the level of a wish. I mean, in that particular case, my vision of Chekhov remained unattainable in certain instances. In terms of ensemble work, this is the most difficult that the group has done to date. Of course, it wasn't my most difficult task because in staging Chekhov, there's no need to look for solutions; one's sole responsibility is to unearth the reality of the writer's perfection. That is a very simple, and by the same token, very difficult task.

**As someone who allows for countless realities with respect to Chekhov, you must know that truth and reality are two different things . . .**

Chekhov answers that question himself. He constantly speaks of contradictions, and that's where the difference between truth and reality is found. Our whole rehearsal period boiled down to and focused on developing the actors' varied sensibilities, for Chekhov can only be presented by granting different sensibilities. Sound, movement, silence, stillness, glance, action and reaction, all these and their interplay among themselves is the performance that Chekhov asks from the actors and me.

**A relationship with what lies behind the dialogue?**

The interrelationships among the actors and a relationship with what lies behind the dialogue verge on reality when the actors have had a taste of it — a taste of that secret, of the unspoken, the inconceivable. The only difference is that actors face the perennial challenge of how to establish a relationship with what lies behind the dialogue every night and in every per-

formance. The actor is not always confronted with such a challenge, and that very exception makes actors of Chekhov's plays more responsible, more sensitive, and more human. I don't think any actor will ever tire of performing in a play by Chekhov.

**Do the potentials of a work form you, or does your work form your potentials?**

Usually, a combination of the two defines the structure of my work. I try to ask questions from the elements at my disposal and expect answers.

**And experimentation?**

The collection of experiments and tryouts in such works has to condense or in a sense, ripen, meaning actor and director (basically, artists) mature through experimentation. The run of *The Cherry Orchard* at CT is no longer experimental. We may carry out open experiments with this work elsewhere in the coming months but none of the works at CT will be experimental. The term experiment is altogether used imprecisely nowadays; for me, experiment means breaking, playing, and restoring.

**How do you think Chekhov would have staged this work if he had wanted to?**

I don't know for sure, but I'm certain that he was oftentimes critical of Stanislavski's productions of his works for his excessive attention to superfluous details. He had once stated, "The reality of theatre and art is different from living reality," and by way of an example, had said: "Stanislavski's production is like a portrait that instead of a painted nose has a real nose. Of course, the nose looks quite natural, but the portrait is corrupted!"

**Your choice of the plays you have so far staged (intellectually and emotionally speaking)?**

I've learned a lesson from each of them. In *Research*/Pazhuheshi, I was more than anything theatrical. In *Beckett 5*, I understood the meaning of play; in working with Handke's texts, the relationship with the actor; and finally, in Chekhov, the difficulty of attaining perfect reality!

**Would you allow your theatre productions to be filmed as your movies?**

No! Cinema has a language and a relationship totally distinct from theatre and it is vital for me to always deal with both; dealing with both shows me when it's time to focus on one or the other. While being very active and busy with theatre, I know that when it's really necessary, I'll make a film; but I'll never become an opportunist just to make a film.

**How far along the path do you feel you have traveled?**

I don't think I'd ever imagined a specific path that would let me pinpoint where I am now. But I do know that my thinking was different and have tried to stay faithful to that belief. That is why people who shared my beliefs have stayed with me throughout the years; the result of that devotion, and its raison d'être, is the existence of the City Players Group. Now, the challenge is having faith in the group and in each of its members.

**To what end?**

We still wake up every morning!

## *As We Were: A Time that Cannot Be Measured by the Dimensions of a Clock*

Jamshid Chalangi, *Mardom Newspaper*, 8 February 1972

**In your view, to what extent was Adamov influenced by the science of psychology?**

Adamov's *Le Moi et l'inconscient* (1938) was the first translation from German into French of Jung's seminal essay, *The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious*. That naturally suggests Jung's ideas must have been congruent with his way of thinking.

**Don't you think that "A" is among those people who cannot develop intellectually owing to a conflict between their conscious and unconscious minds?**

Exactly. The text moves in a zone between the conscious and the unconscious, meaning the drama takes shape between these two, between what we perceive and what we don't perceive, between root and fruit.

**In the relationship between "A" and the mother, the mother makes no explicit demands as such; it's simply a relationship that does not lead to any mutual understanding. How do you see that?**

The mother's relationship *is* demanding; note that at one point "A" says: "She should have known (*I should have*). All that was needed was for her (*for me*) to glance over at father (*my father*)." But such a thing has never happened, which is why the father has committed suicide.

In the father-mother relationship, there's also a natural connection between the mother's wish and the lack of understanding with the father because of it. Every night, she sends the child off to the casino to fetch the father, a gambler who keeps losing the family fortune, and bring him back home. It becomes apparent that this wish is in effect the mother's intense devotion to the future of the child, and it is this same intense devotion that has changed the mother-son relationship into something of a demanding relationship that Adamov sees as the reason for the mother's lack of development apropos of the child. Meaning the mother always sees an infant in her child. Though time has moved on, the mother has remained locked in that moment, a problem that has turned into a tragic relationship. It is essentially a shared moment between mother and son that never changes — age (*time*) advances, but its root, that connective moment between mother and child, remains a constant.

Tragedy occurs when a fissure opens between that moment and the ones that follow, meaning a chasm opens in this relationship as a result of which people lose sight of one another, like the mother who enters "A's" room looking for her child but at the end of the play finds her child in "A". The entire trajectory of the play signals this distance, signals the chasm between relationships.

**In *As We Were*, the presence of death causes a closed circuit to form in the interrelationships; to what extent is that associated with the father's death?**

A closed circuit indicates a particularly inhibited form of life. The father's suicide is a voluntary ending of life. Once the relationship has ended, life gives in to a closed circuit and does not follow its natural course; so, the father has ended up with suicide and the other people who are related to him, whether child or wife or sister, have all fallen into a closed circuit and "go in circles," each in their own way. The real drama, or the real secret, is in effect the father's suicide. Why has the father lacked the strength to have a real affinity with life's realities or challenges and accept natural death? The father's absence is as crucial in this play as is the mother's demanding presence.

**When faced with reality, the aunt, "A," and the mother, fall apart. Is it the fearsome power of reality or its denial that causes such paroxysm?**

It's basically their incapacity to grasp the secret of their existence; these are people who have a fear of the future and the source of that fear is their past; therefore, their present is void of life.

**The past runs through the characters' actions like a ceaseless current and seems to paralyze them by its force. In my mind, that is what drains life from their present.**

Exactly. That's the same connection to the secret of the father's death — which has occurred in the past — and is in fact the secret of all these ostensibly live people that is being laid out on a more complex level. Because that death is not a natural death — it's a suicide — when this secret is exposed, all three figures retreat to the time that they share in common: "A" becomes a child, the mother becomes a real mother, the aunt grows young to the point where like an ordinary child, she plays with toys. It is at that precise moment when all of them can easily accept the father's absence. In the course of the play, we notice that this moment is very special and belongs to an entirely different order of time, a time that cannot be measured by the dimensions of a clock.

**Adamov's works exhibit neither change nor evolution but a kind of synthesis between surrealism and engaged art. What are your thoughts on that?**

All committed surrealists followed that path. In surrealist thought, the meaning and the relationship of engagement to reality was more complex, and given his collaboration and closeness to French surrealists, it was natural for Adamov to have been influenced by that worldview. Adamov was able to see a relationship between a stateless (*apatride*) and a fatherless individual, that is, a relationship between the individual and society, the particular and the general. That relationship is not examined from a philosophical perspective, however, but a poetic one. As an advocate of this poetic perspective, Adamov applied the theories and opinions of his contemporary psychoanalysts.

**Given Adamov's life, such a worldview was presumably a direct outgrowth of his personal life.**

Absolutely. All Adamov's plays have undeniable roots in his own life. Adamov allowed his writing to nourish from that source consciously. This may happen to another writer unconsciously but in the case of Adamov it's the exact opposite; he pursued it consciously. As a result, broader dimensions and more complex concepts become reflected in his writings.

**Adamov shows little inclination to using symbols in his plays, but in *As We Were*, symbols are present in other dimensions. What are your thoughts about that, and why did you couple the wedding and mourning dresses at the end of the play?**

Adamov shunned artificial and manufactured symbols, and in his later works always tried to draw on realities to qualify truth. In this work, too, it's realities that at one moment shine the light on truth; that is not an artificial construct but an eloquent symbol.

In Adamov's writings, words function by association; each one of these terms is a world onto itself. For instance, in the mother's mind, the word "smoke" means "dirt," while to "A," it means "ignorance". That difference is the subject of the play itself, namely, an unfulfilled wish, the unfulfilled wish in this drama being "A's" independence. In the beginning, he announces his willingness to get married. That is another feature of his opportunity and his desire to become independent. The moment when all three characters in the play come up against that gap between words and relationships, a "gauze" appears that connects that unfulfilled wish to its source. It's by token of that "sign" that the marriage leads to the moment of birth or death.

**In your production of this play, did you accentuate "movement" or the text?**

The method when working on a play is to try to discover the text's latent movements in the course of the rehearsals. Naturally, these movements then have to be enacted. None of the movements can be discovered before the latent movements in the words themselves have been discovered, which means no movement is imposed on the text in advance.

## In Pursuit of Collective Goals in Theatre

Behnam Nateqi, "Theatre and Cinema," *Farhang o Zendegi*, spring/winter 1973-1974

**I would like to begin by asking you about your activities at TW and the advantages that working there offered you personally. This will help us understand the function of a workshop from your viewpoint.**

There is little precedent in Iranian theatre for doing professional work collectively, and that problem always defeats the purpose of the work. My efforts have been consistently directed at overcoming that obstacle and solving that problem. At TW, work proceeds in such a way as to give plays a chance to come to life. To achieve that goal, a close-knit ensemble working continuously for the last three years has helped develop mutual professional trust, and that opens the way to creativity. Consequently, none of our works look or feel like works that others are doing in theatre.

**What difference does that make?**

For one thing, we can always return to our prior works and reevaluate them. Working with a permanent group allows us to take a distance from past works for a while, return to them later, and work on them again based on a more constructive examination of audience reception.

Of all the works that the group has done, seven or eight are part of the TW repertory. Some are polished while others are still a work in progress. We set aside those that are easier for us because we don't want to limit ourselves to what we know we can do.

**Is that why you stage diverse types of works?**

They're diverse on the surface but have an inherent connection. Diversity stimulates professional relationships, creatively speaking. What's never happened in Iran before is for a group to grow into a living organism over time so that it isn't just one director who determines the course but the collection of works, the interactions among the members, and the encounters between individuals that together define the path.

**What challenges are you still faced with in your work?**

The most outstanding challenge is that of writers. That's true not just for us, but outside the Workshop as well. Unfortunately, writers continue to work with established models and write within constraints; they don't appreciate that one can create a play out of very simple events as well. We've tried to address this question at TW. Just as an actor or a director search for new possibilities, a writer should be able to do the same.

**Have you had any success in that area?**

Consider Esma'il Khalaj; I think that without the benefit of TW, he would have never developed into a writer with such capabilities as he possesses today. The TW milieu with its-friendships, interrelationships, and interests, has helped Khalaj find a style close to his own psychological make-up and potentials. Khalaj may have become a writer outside the Workshop as well, but there's no doubt he would have not been able to accomplish what he has today.

Like most other playwrights, those working with us at TW write a play first and then offer it for production. We don't yet have a dramatist in the workshop-based sense. By that I mean a person that can write a play as it is "becoming". We've tried to create the right conditions for such writings to develop.

**What are some of the other advantages of workshop-based practices? And what do you think has been achieved so far?**

The most noteworthy achievement at TW is the creative relationships that have evolved among the actors, directors, and writers at a professional level. That means that beyond the actual staging of plays, we consider theatre a matter of collaborative group relations at the Workshop. With a very small performance space and an even smaller rehearsal room and a single office, we have developed a repertoire of ten to fifteen plays, something that much larg-

er and better provided organizations could have done but have failed to do.

Our system ensured continuity in the professional careers of directors, writers, and actors; from the perspective of creativity, theatre became a continuum. That factor delegated a much more complex professional responsibility to the actors; it also offered a wider selection of programs to the audience. In practice, continuity has proven to impact both groups — actors and spectators — in deep and positive ways; it nurtures them in parallel.

This phenomenon has been the single most important development in the last five years in Iranian theatre and fortunately is not the handiwork of one person but the fruit of a collective effort; it's the outcome of the efforts of those who create and those who watch. It really is a communal relationship, generally speaking. Only after such a development can we say that theatre has been born. We understand this sensitive premise today. From here on, we can pursue longer-term goals along new paths. The advantage of this kind of work is that it doesn't cancel out any professional criteria as others understand them; nor does it conclude that work done by those outside of the Workshop was poor or futile. What it does is offer a kind of baseline and model for those who aspire to broader, collective goals.

**To learn about your creative process, it helps to examine your role as a director. That calls for reviewing your work from its inception and finding out how the theatrical ideas were formed and nurtured and what sort of experiments the current ensemble represents.**

I don't find my role as a director interesting; I dislike that association. What I would like to talk about is what happens in our group, what happens in the Workshop's other groups, how I feel and think about them, and what path I've followed.

**Those are the same things I want to know.**

Very well. Plays and presentation — giving form to moods, feelings, sensitivities, outlooks, understandings, etc. — is something I've always thought about in two completely different ways: the theatrical and the cinematic. Following my experience in various domains, I staged *Miss Julie*. That play taught me an important lesson in a practical way: that achieving a real and sustained sensitivity theatrically was impossible, and that without specially trained actors, it was unfeasible.

*Miss Julie* was a well-formed and solid and beautiful work whose runs were of lesser quality than its rehearsals. This turned into a question for me, a life-or-death question, professionally speaking. Work continued with *The Respectable Beggars* and *Research*/Pazhuheshi.

**Which caused a tremendous firestorm and affected the overall landscape of theatre production. The least one can say is that it liberated the stage from its conventions. How do you see that?**

For me, *Research*/Pazhuheshi is my most important creative work in theatre. It was the first play I was creating from scratch, unbound by any constraints, because I didn't have to take any entrenched standards and criteria into account. My relationship to it was direct and from a clean slate. It so happened that even the author never imagined it would ever be staged. Although I had total freedom in the production, a firm discipline held throughout, and the

outcome was wholly authentic and theatrical. Plus, its impact on the actors and others and on me was inclusive. The same factor I mentioned before: the sum of varied elements that can come together to advance a work and resolve a problem.

**Was it the same with *Vīs o Ramin*?**

No. That work was tied to a specific objective, meaning it was developed for a specific location for a specific day and a specific time. Other issues were at play as well. It was the Workshop's opening year and we had to deal with the task of creating a pool of actors. *Research*/Pazhuheshi was still running. We had started touring it abroad and that made everyone involved, even me, better appreciate its significance. That experience gradually grew into a strong professional backbone for a number of people. After a while, we realized we could build something together.

In the span of that artistic-professional awareness that was growing in everyone, the presentation of *Research*/Pazhuheshi in Europe offered me and another ensemble member the opportunity to collaborate with venerable professional and experimental theatre groups abroad. The result of our collaborations and contacts was that it enabled other members of the Workshop to step onto a serious platform in the field. The upshot of their efforts was an in-depth professional awareness that grew out of the actors having worked with Peter Brook. We were able to achieve professional consistency and came to understand what we wanted from theatre and why we worked in theatre . . . These questions acquired an existential meaning, at least for the people who worked with us, and were no longer abstract notions.

**How would you describe your work relative to preconceived paths and programs?**

Outwardly, all our works had "to be seen," to be seen in the sense that one couldn't predict the form in which we would stage a play by merely reading the text or thinking about it. That has been labeled formalist, but in my opinion, it's more accurate to call it "revelatory," or "theatrical". The imagery was extracted from the theatrical potentials of the plays themselves. It's true that my imagination affected these works but the group's potentials and the writings themselves were important catalysts.

**Would you say that factor is essential to the continuity of your professional output?**

Yes, and continuity is something that's rare in Iran. I feel continuity, at least in my own work. While the outward look of the productions and the names and styles of the writers are varied, their primary essence is not. In that context, every play is interpreted and given shape by everyone in our group. We sometimes approach a work from an angle that we already know to be the most difficult. We prefer a difficult path that may teach us new things to an easy one. We rarely tackle works from tried-and-true angles. That has given us the liberty to make mistakes and be creative.

**By definition, that approach affects your choice of plays and overall style, doesn't it?**

Definitely. The proposition 'I like this play so let's get together and stage it' is not what we're

about. In practice, we're finding the problem we had in *Miss Julie* in the past to be a bonus in the current work, which is to say, its public performance is now superior to the rehearsals. We now feel confident that we can offer more enduring values to the audience.

The issue of how to achieve communion with the audience has always been my concern and resolving it is the most interesting aspect of our work. When I say it's an issue for us, I should elaborate. Look, what I think ought to be communicated to the audience can never be relayed fully and unequivocally. The important thing is not to let any distance come between an intention and the moment of the act. Our quest, the entire path of our work, is to eliminate that distance or at least minimize it. If we can eliminate that distance, a healthy relationship will be established, a vigorous and sustained relationship, something that is the lifeline of theatre.

**Don't you think our needs ten years ago were radically different from what we're seeing today? We have to develop a theatre more aligned with our new cultural needs.**

A thing has to be understood and have integrity for us to be able to communicate it to others. Traditional theatre — what it is — cannot be transmitted to the new generation the way it's being presented today. We see in practice that its forms and expressions cannot be imitated without relinquishing its essence. For instance, one can imitate the outward form of *ta'ziyeh* but if you ignore its religious fabric, what is left is ridiculous; its form and content are interdependent. *Ta'ziyeh* is a religious ritual and a specific form, and it can only be presented as such. Imitating its exterior form means the exchange will remain superficial and can never go any deeper. Because *ruhowzi* has a light-hearted and secular esprit, it's naturally easier to imitate, but it's impossible to use it to communicate complex notions. It should be left unsophisticated. If you remove the festive function and the party atmosphere from *ruhowzi*, nothing will be left.

**So, what kind of theatre can we have? Can old traditions lead to a new path at all? Can they be exploited to serve more contemporary themes?**

What we've had to date has been imitative. Whether it's imitating European theatre, or the forms of our own traditional theatre doesn't make a difference. All the productions that have hinged on traditions, from *ruhowzi* to *ta'ziyeh* and puppet theatre, have been at the level of imitation.

Only a few works have been able to introduce conditions for the growth of a new theatre in Iran. Mrs. Khojasteh Kia's *A Meditation on the Tragedy of Hossein Ibn-e Mansour-e Hallaj* and Bijan Mofid's City of Tales/*Shahr-e Qesseh* are two fitting examples in this connection. These two works are not the outcome of gratuitous imitation but the product of a new creativity. These kinds of experiments can only be found in workshop environments; both were in fact created in just such an environment. That is exactly what workshop means, providing a space for those on a quest who wish to opt out of imitation and embrace the authentic.

**Has TW been used for that purpose already, or can it be used that way — as a center that conducts experiments and by exporting the products of its efforts, takes on a national leadership role in theatre?**

One can look into that. In terms of returns, one could compare the fifteen-year-long history

of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, which is the other theatre center in Iran, with the five-year-long output of TW. If the products of these two centers were compared thoughtfully and free of any bias, it would tell us which has been more fruitful. No doubt each has both positive and negative points. The result of such a comparison could create a third, wider path.

Personally, I don't consider what is happening in provincial cities to be healthy. Some graduates of university drama departments move to the provinces and engage in theatre. University departments still don't know who they want to educate in the domain of theatre, actors, directors, or scholars. Their teaching methods are outdated and obsolete, which means that their students' going to the provinces to teach drama can't be healthy, though it seems like a positive thing because it introduces theatre to locales where it's not even on the map. And that's exactly where the danger lies, because a fledgling idea veers off track from the get-go.

**Why do you think our drama departments are unable to educate competent persons in theatre while TW can?**

It's quite natural. Besides the problem of their teaching methodology and their outdated and obsolete curricula, the critical issue is the absence of any room for experimentation and mistakes, and of any awareness of those areas. In a workshop you're allowed to make mistakes; you can't do that in a university because your work won't be appreciated, and you'll fail the grade; your degree will be postponed. The Workshop doesn't grant degrees to anyone. Not being allowed to make mistakes stunts creativity. On top of that, our universities have extra-curricular requirements and formalities that disrupt theatre work and preclude wholesome and energetic people from gaining a practical education in theatre.

## Ovanessian's *Caligula*

[unnamed interviewer] *The Eighth Arts Festival Newspaper,* Shiraz: 18 August 1974

### *Presentation and discussion forum*

*Ovanessian*: I'd like to begin by telling you about alterations we have made to the play for staging *Caligula*. These alterations are exclusively production-related and not literary. The text has not been altered. The purpose of the changes is to help stage or dramatize certain concepts. Unfortunately, Camus' play is fundamentally flawed when it comes to staging; the dialogues are written in an intellectual and literary mold, not as real theatrical dialogues. As for structure, the play is set up with very artificial entrances and exits. This drawback and weakness become more apparent when Camus' four acts are staged as written.

In the rehearsals, we came to free the play from its four-act structure without changing the sequence. We recreated the dynamics of theatre in Shakespeare's time, especially the spirit of Shakespeare's Roman plays.

The reason why Caligula's role is performed by two actors was a fortuitous turn of events during a rehearsal. In the beginning, we had decided that two separate actors would play Caligula on different evenings and that is how the rehearsals began. But during one of the sessions, the two Caligulas accidentally read the part simultaneously, and that bemused the other actors. We realized that some of the concepts in the play had suddenly become more theatrical

and alive; we therefore adopted that idea as the heart of the mise en scène and started from there. But our intention in having two Caligulas was not to underscore the conflicts and split the personality in such a way that one actor would assume one disposition exclusively and the other, another; nor did we want to produce a homogeneous image of Caligula as a specific historical figure. What we were after was an inclusive persona that would indirectly evoke the spirit, the goal, and the meaning of our production.

**What made you decide to stage *Caligula*?**

Camus and his writings, especially *Caligula*, have a certain appeal to Iranian youths of a certain age. The play had never been staged in Iran; everybody dreamed of seeing *Caligula*, and a very strange and curious aura shrouded the text. We wanted to know where this relationship might lead to in such circumstances and find out what lay at the play's depths that had so magnetized so many people. This production is the outgrowth of our queries; everyone is free to draw their own conclusions, from the viewpoint of the actor, director, or spectator.

**You mentioned that having two actors was not meant to split Caligula's personality. Given that we encounter Caligula onstage where the two naturally exhibit different dimensions, I'd like to ask you to explain their states of mind, since one is self-confident and somewhat introverted, and the other seems more attached to his own roots.**

The idea was not to endow one with one set of characteristics and the other with a different set, that is, for one to be a poet and the other a murderer. Basically, the goal is to present Caligula's psychological complexity such that one can understand and follow it. Naturally, when Caligula is played by two individuals, each offers an interpretation akin to his own sensitivities and state of mind. As staged, when the two perform the same act simultaneously, their similarities and differences must be discernible, and a portrait should emerge from the heart of the schism that aligns with the loneliness that Camus is tracing in Caligula's personality.

**Reference social imperatives and societal demands, what motivated you to stage this work and to what extent do you feel engaged with it?**

The term engagement, or socio-political responsibility, is a curious word everywhere, especially among Iranians. For the majority, it stands for a kind of collective bonding. When a group of people shout in protest, it's enough for you to shout along with them for you to be called engaged. For me, when people shout, engagement starts when I see what happens inside me, the act that I commit. That shows my engagement with what is happening, which naturally can't be isolated and is necessarily related to others, but on a different level.

**In your Chekhov, although the story is straightforward, the production was very abstract, while in the case of Camus' *Caligula*, which is very abstract and complex, the production is very straightforward and follows a straight line to the end. Could you explain the reason for this contrast?**

The goal of a play or its production is always to convey what is not readily discernible. In Chekhov, there's no need to point out and highlight what everybody already knows; rather,

one must pay attention to what the audience cannot know and see easily. In Camus, the writing is philosophical and communicates only on an abstract level. Our production has to impart an understanding that would otherwise elude people if they only read the text.

Every play has problems peculiar to it and is the double of its own opposite. There is a complementary situation for every situation that when revealed, forms a complete whole with the original.

**Before the start and Caligula's entrance, the actors were busy doing different things on stage. Was that scene part of the play?**

In the story, Caligula's sister dies. He is in love with her and when she dies something happens to him; he discovers impulses previously unknown to him. Communicating his state of mind theatrically without outright mimicry demanded that a sense of such a situation, a broken world, be conveyed indirectly through imagery.

In the rehearsal process, we reached a point that raised several questions for us. In the play, consciously or unconsciously, Camus has suggested several breakages with noted imagery. One is the breakage in the relation between Caligula and his sister due to her death that provokes a turn of events; the other is the gradual rupture that Caligula self-provokes in his relationship with others, and finally, the rupture that occurs with the shattering of the mirror (before his death, Caligula shatters the mirror before him). If we had staged all these themes explicitly — shatter the mirror to show broken relationships or show the sister dying at the start of the play — we would have been expressing them literally, whereas we sought to convey them implicitly.

Camus was very fond of Dostoevsky and had adapted *The Possessed,* one of his novels, for the stage. In *The Possessed* we read: ". . . something began spreading over the town. Mysterious fires broke out; the number of thefts doubled. A second lieutenant who had got into the habit of lighting candles in his room in front of books expounding materialistic ideas suddenly scratched and bit his commanding officer. A lady of the highest society began beating her children at fixed intervals and insulting the poor whenever she had an opportunity. And another wanted to practice free love with her husband. "That's impossible," she was told. "What do you mean?" she exclaimed, "we're free, aren't we?" We were free indeed, but of what?"[4] Such a situation where something happens, or something breaks, and that breakage alters another person's consciousness and produces a void became the foundation of our first rehearsal. Each actor developed a set of thematic movements and actions based on the text and on their own role that they had to perform up to the moment that the atmosphere shattered, where the breakage was accompanied by the screech of sirens. Those actions were in fact a prelude to psychologically prepare the spectators and the actors and served as an introduction to our approach.

**The set is in the form of a cross. Is that accidental?**

As I mentioned before, the production owes itself as much to planning as to fortuitous mo-

[4] Second Part, Scene 11: 113, in Albert Camus, *The Posssessed*: *A Play in Three Parts,* Justin O'Brien, tr. Alfred A. Knopf 1960. The passage, translated from the English by Abbas Nalbandian, appeared in the *Caligula* playbill at the Shiraz Arts Festival and CT and was read out in the Presentation and Discussion Forum.

ments. In the beginning, the idea was for the performance to take place on top of a long wooden board with the audience seated on both sides, but as the question of psychological schism or duality took hold, I looked for an opportunity to render that idea more visual. I had read a passage in a book that defined the meaning of schizophrenia and traced its root to a Greek expression for broken soul or a broken heart. In light of Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*, and having two Caligulas and two parallel lines, that idea assumed more vitality. When we arrived at Persepolis to look for a performance space, the ruins of Tachareh Palace seemed the best choice, both for their natural acoustic as we did not want to use an amplification system, and spatial possibilities. The only entry and exit points available were the stone portals and window frames. When I connected those points together on paper, the form that emerged was the route of the hallways, an image suggestive of two conjoint crosses. That was an extraordinary revelation. The mise en scène was immediately configured according to that design.

**I had seen a classic staging of *Caligula* in France and of course didn't expect Ovanessian to produce the play in a classic style, just as young French directors today wouldn't. But my issue is that very serious subjects throughout the play have at times been projected with levity and lewdness. This is especially true where Cassius Cherea is delivering an earnest speech that gets drowned in the others' laughter; or why is Helicon who is a serious figure in the original play portrayed as a clown?**

In the Cherea scene, laughter is meant to reflect a point in the text itself; Cherea is at odds with the Patricians. He is speaking eloquently but the others cannot understand him and are laughing. With our approach, it is easier to see how hard Cherea is trying to relate.

In the case of Helicon who speaks with a sense of humor — he's a slave who was freed by Caligula — we know that in traditional Roman theatre most comedy writers were slaves and slaves were court jesters and advisers to grandees; the best example is the jester in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Similarly, in Iranian traditions, clowns in *ruhowzi* are black, which undoubtedly has Roman roots. That is Helicon's relationship to Caligula who like Pierrot chases after the moon. That yearning reflects the close affinity between Helicon and Caligula.

**In some parts of the production, especially in the earlier parts, two Caligulas appear in person simultaneously in two separate scenes with different interlocuters; this creates confusion for the audience who doesn't know which to pay attention to, especially as most of the exchanges seem rather weighty and the audience needs to concentrate and understand; it is also anti-Brechtian. Is this confusion caused intentionally or is there another reason?**

On the contrary, this approach is in conformity with Brecht's thinking and not opposed to it, it's directly in line with what he calls "defamiliarization" or the "estrangement effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*) — if our goal were Brecht, that is, which it isn't.

The kind of reactions that the other characters have to Caligula's return, some accommodating, others incredulous, is because Caligula has come back with ideas that are in constant fluctuation. Our syncretistic staging lets the audience grasp this predicament through theatre without relying on words alone.

**That's the end of the questions but aren't there more questions?**

## *Little Eyolf*: *The Silence Responds*

Alireza Rezai, *Tamasha*, 15 January 1975

**In the production, we learn that the river runs into a swamp. Is that the fate of the people in *Little Eyolf*? Will a flower grow in that swamp?**

These people do have a chance to flower in the swamp, but they have to hit bottom first before they can flower, for the seed to split and sprout. At first, these people are on the surface; they're in the middle; they're "bourgeois". Once they are submerged in the "swamp," they might rise and flower. The question is whether a seed that's submerged in a swamp can flower. The silence responds.

**The swamp could be death and flowering, just as soil where a corpse is buried grows more fertile than soil where there is no corpse.**

That's the main problem and the contradiction; water that is vital and water that is fatal. Water that drowns and water that soothes. Water that purifies and water that is resurrection and water that brings death; and life that brings death. An inseparable double . . .

**Humanity is helpless before this problem; it has to be silent and silence is the respondent. In most of Ibsen's writings, we come across 'gnosis,' for instance in *Brand*, one of Ibsen's prized works . . .**

There is no doubt Ibsen "knows" something that others don't. Now, you can call that gnosis or whatever else . . . but that sense always surfaces in Ibsen's more enduring works and grows more and more prominent.

**In most of Ibsen's works, a human is a deprived and defeated creature that suffers.**

For human beings to attain "perfection," they have to suffer, and that is painful. Perfection cannot be attained without loss. Everything has a price.

**There is a close relationship between the two plays, *The Lady from the Sea* and *Little Eyolf*.**

In fact, from *The Master Builder* on they all share a common source, which in my view is best illustrated in *Little Eyolf* and after that, in *When We Dead Awaken*.

**Does Ibsen believe the dead will be resurrected?**

*. . . silence*

**Subsequent to changes in his thinking and worldview, Ibsen becomes in a way obsessed with suicide or infanticide, and with that obsession and interest, in three of his plays, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Little Eyolf*, children are sacrificed for their parents.**

That's one of Ibsen's intimacies . . . the legacy of the original sin, which happened in the Garden of Eden . . . eating the forbidden fruit . . .

**One of the central characters of this play is Rat Woman. What is the relationship between this woman and the neighborhood and the individuals?**

The woman has lost her lover.

**Do the performances that this group has done to date continue a thread of thoughts that complement one another?**

Maybe.

## I Prefer Ibsen the Poet to Ibsen the Preacher

Zaven Qukasian, *Negin*, 23 March 1975

**Mr. Ovanessian, before we discuss *Little Eyolf*, I would like to ask about the reason for the trajectory of your productions. You start with *Hedda Gabler*, then turn to experimental works like *Research*/Pazhuheshi, *Beckett 5*, and Handke's works, which are the peak of this arc, and then you return to works in the classic fold and put on plays by Chekhov, Strindberg, Pirandello, and recently, this work. What is the reason for this reversal?**

The starting point was *Miss Julie*, actually, before the rest. All these playwrights essentially share the same query and dilemma. They differ from one another in the way they express themselves, so, communicating the ideas that these writers have in mind calls for different methods. Naturally, a classic play will be meaningless unless we address the writer's real and penetrating questions with contemporary sensitivities. As important as the standard forms of these plays may be, they should be as keenly scrutinized and pulled apart so that their veiled content may awaken and come to life. We may agree with some of the ideas of these authors today or reject them, but we can't deny their existence, especially not those with sensitivities and views that transformed a century-old approach to theatrical productions and relations in their own lifetime. In his time, Ibsen was as innovative and avant-garde in dramatic literature as are Beckett and Handke today; Chekhov, Pirandello, and Strindberg were likewise as innovative and avant-garde. In theatre, they always represented a kind of experimental drama — writers that heralded a new world, a new outlook, and new relationships. I have a lot of respect for that kind of thinking where people can touch a new moment, a less adulterated moment, at the depths.

**Some critics consider plays from the latter period of Ibsen's life of inferior quality. What are your thoughts on that? Specifically, why did you choose to produce *Little Eyolf*, and why Ibsen?**

That's a very conventional viewpoint, of course, because suppose a critic with the sensitivities and preoccupations of their own times considered a certain period of Ibsen's work superior,

so others have gone on to copy and repeat the same thoughts over and over. As a matter of fact, I seriously dislike that Ibsen. I prefer Ibsen the poet to Ibsen the preacher. When I worked on *Hedda Gabler*, it wasn't because I agreed with the play; it was in fact the exact opposite. In my view, the play was about a really outdated moral and spiritual conflict entirely owned by the middle class, and it was of little value in my mind. I staged that play with a kind of humor, meaning, I didn't take the conflict that's broached in the play seriously but tried to offer a new interpretation of Ibsen's encounter with his society.

Ibsen the poet is the Ibsen we see in *Brand*, in *Peer Gynt*; *Little Eyolf* and *When We Dead Awaken* are among the best examples of that from the later period. Although the characters in these plays are middle class, their conflicts are not class-based, rather, they're broadly applicable human conflicts that are extendable and inclusive. Most importantly, the plays examine metaphysical questions in very familiar forms without the goal in broaching them being to offer a moral. If critics have at some point considered this period of Ibsen to be less praiseworthy, it's because they had grown accustomed to the Ibsen of a particular period and expected it to repeat itself. But Ibsen was greater than to remain within such a confined framework; he rent himself and went farther. Ibsen's last plays, though very simple in form, are highly complex. In terms of staging, they force truly great difficulties and challenges upon producers.

In his last period and his poetic plays, Ibsen is still on the vanguard. He's a sort of link between us and future times. These plays were so highly regarded by modernizing writers that James Joyce learned Norwegian for instance, so he could read *When We Dead Awaken* in the original language. We know that Joyce is the founder of modern literature and has had the greatest influence on Beckett. An invisible thread ran through these progressive European literary minds, and though Joyce and Beckett seem abstract and Ibsen does not, all of them nourish from the same source and share a common goal.

**What are some of the production challenges you referred to, and what did you find to be helpful overall?**

This play has an extremely sensitive text; its structural composition is flawless, and in terms of dialogue, it's a brilliant example of dramatic literature. But despite all these strengths and a highly realistic and very profound and thorough psychology, staging it to the height of its sensitivity requires extraordinary and dense concentration and exercises and specially prepared actors.

This is one of the few plays that I always thought would be impossible to stage given the abilities of Iranian actors and position of theatre in Iran; but fortunately, our ensemble work made it possible for this play to be produced. Two or three years ago, I couldn't even imagine being able to stage *Little Eyolf* with Iranian actors, not because of what you may think, that Iranians wouldn't understand the play, but because I didn't think Iranian actors could conjure its sensibilities in relation to the audience and to themselves. That's one problem.

The second problem was how to go beyond the superficial and reach a spiritual level without overlooking appearances. One of the difficulties with these kinds of plays is that when they're translated, much of their inner core and sensitivities get lost, while they also lack any outward features that can attract the viewer or the actor or the director. In terms of composition, the Ibsen of the middle period always presages a false excitement that makes the audience want to know what happens next. All the events in this play percolate and end in Act 1. There is

no other event in the outward sense, and it all turns inward. That's one of the production challenges of this text and it may explain why it is rarely staged. Cast famous stars to perform the characters of this play, and it turns into a showcase for the actors' talents. If you cast less experienced actors, given our current theatrical conditions, the interrelationships won't as a rule be conveyed as simply and effortlessly.

**In this play, Ibsen, whose previous works were clearly marked by strands of realism, has shifted to a wholly overt and absolute symbolic mode, which is undeniably more enduring?**

Symbolism is found in all of Ibsen's work to some degree, except in this one it's more poetic; it's no longer overtly symbolic but is replete with sensitive poetic nuances.

**In your earlier works you utilized color as an exclusive keystone but in this play, colors have been used more extensively, which makes it somewhat easier to understand the play. I therefore thought there might have been an affinity between these colors and Ibsen himself.**

For the visual aspect of this play I have drawn on many paintings by Edvard Munch, the Norwegian artist who was Ibsen's contemporary and friends with him and Strindberg, without copying them directly. The artist's closeness to Ibsen and Strindberg is evident and their mindset is very similar. My idea was for that shared mindset, that awareness of time, that awareness that portends a certain sensitivity and connects to another time, to be experienced once more.

Naturally, every mental state has a world of colors and sounds and composition peculiar to it. When you try to give them objective form, should a deeper integrity and relationship be at work, the elements start to interact with one another. One of the elements in this play is the relationship between water and fire — the elements that give life to water and fire or are born from them. In this play, the particular tragedy and drama that obtains between water and fire is brought into play. As a result, when you want to display that interaction — that drama and that conflict — they reveal their colors. There is no ambiguity or arbitrary choice in this text; it is a poet that speaks. I think it is one of the strengths of the text that when these colors are employed, they become more central and prominent, which is to say they have an affinity with the text and the text allows these colors to acquire a reality and meaning.

**Rat Wife receives more attention in your production than in the play, and her nature gets across to the audience right away. What is the attraction of this woman for you?**

This character has a more poetic and supernatural nature in the play than all the other characters; her appearance is as natural as the others. She also has deep roots in the minds of the other characters and is familiar to the audience. In identifying her as a vagabond and a drifter, Ibsen has drawn on local, European, and Scandinavian tales and myths to develop this character. So, when Rat Wife encounters the other characters, she has already experienced the roots and the myths to find salvation. The others also have to live through that experience to understand her.

Rita has to live her life to become like a "rat wife". Rat Wife has already lived through that experience and has realized her nature and essence. Now, if there's any ambiguity in her, it's

the ambiguity of poetry and myth; her presence or being itself is not in doubt. If the play didn't have Rat Wife, or if Rat Wife were not self-expressive, it would feel like the play didn't have a heart. In my view, the real heart of the play is Rat Wife. If this character fails to elicit the required mental stirring in the audience and in the characters, the play will be deprived of its next moves and will be paralyzed.

**I think Rat Wife has the most effortless relationship with Eyolf.**

Yes, because she's the only person that can also speak a child's language whereas the other characters speak to Eyolf like grownups and try to impose their own language on him. The father imposes on Eyolf to read books; the aunts talks to him about clothing; altogether, everybody talks to him about appearances and imposes a totally external world on him. The father has only just realized that Eyolf has a fantasy and that the fantasy is important to him, and he has to live with it. But Rat Wife talks to Eyolf in the language of tales and allegories and myths; Eyolf understands that, and having understood, naturally follows her. For Eyolf, the story of the rats and the peace of mind, and . . . although frightening, is also fascinating; it responds to all his dreams and thoughts. The other characters don't realize that and have paralyzed Eyolf with an external and exclusively tangible world. If they understood that the world can also be intangible, perhaps Eyolf's paralysis would not have come about as it did.

**In *Little Eyolf*, Ibsen has attained almost a mystical state; the play is also deeply Freudian. Don't you think Freud has had a great influence on Ibsen?**

I think Ibsen has gone beyond Freud in the play; he's more avant-garde and pioneering than Freud and heralds Jung, meaning he presents myths and dreams in this play the way Jung treats them in psychology later. I think Ibsen has connected with the deep roots of existence by reason of being a poet. If they say the play is mystical or holds certain secrets within it, it's due to this poetic dimension and Ibsen's cleansed mind that has enabled him to see these things clearly and reflect them in his plays. This is a play that were we to analyze it through the lens of Eastern philosophy, we would find the answers to it. Likewise, if we analyzed it through the lens of Western philosophy, we could still decipher it. So, one difference between this Ibsen by comparison with the Ibsen of the earlier periods is the Easternization that has crept into his work. It's an Ibsen that has developed a different relationship with light and being.

***How satisfied were you with the production of this play*?**

As far as the production, I believe we're very close to achieving our goal and the play's objective. I personally like the play's intellectual and emotional dimensions a lot. This has been one of our most professionally fruitful experiences. It's rare for a play to be this fruitful, and this is one of the most enriching plays that I have worked on to date. The beauty of this play is that it creates a conflict and then after a while resolves it by itself. This is indicative of an extraordinary vision and maturity that one rarely comes across elsewhere.

## Caligula in Latin America: *More Self-assured Performances*

Farideh Rahbar, *Tamasha*, 26 April 1976

**What were the differences between the productions of *Caligula* in Caracas and Sao Paolo and its run in Iran?**

The trip to Poland made the actors realize that audiences can engage with a play even in a foreign language, and that gave them self-confidence. Poland was the first country where the play was performed for non-Persian speaking spectators. The opportunities for acting and the actors were perfect there because there were no decorative elements around — not the setting of Persepolis, and no set — something that I believe makes actors more sensitive to their work. On the whole, the performances in Latin America were more self-assured, but I wouldn't say they were particularly different in terms of quality.

**What was the audience reaction to the performance?**

What we kept hearing was 'we never imagined the play to be so relevant to the present, and to be staged that way'. Another comment that we regularly heard on those trips was about the new dimensions that had entered the production and how succinctly they were communicated. One of the things that non-Iranian audiences found interesting was Caligula turning into two performers. We had not explained that scheme anywhere; it was something that the audience discovered during the performance; according to them, the instant that that dawned on them was a stirring moment and a real surprise.

One night, we gave a performance exclusively for theatre professionals; the actors and directors in the city wanted to come and see the play. Thus, theatres across the city shut down for one night so they could watch *Caligula*. About 900 to 1,000 spectators attended; we had never performed the play for so many people before that day. On top of that, although the show had been organized for theatre professionals, many others who had seen it on previous nights had come back to watch it again.

**What did the critics think of *Caligula*?**

About forty different groups that had previously participated at Nancy or Wroclaw presented at the Caracas Festival, plus Latin American countries. According to the organizers, our program exceeded all expectations. In Sao Paolo, word was that their critics had never been unanimous about a program and that *Caligula* was evidently a rare example where critics had been unanimous and had endorsed the same program, so to speak.

**How would you compare the recent trip with the one to Poland? How were they different?**

Each was valuable in its own way. Both trips were very instructive. In effect, they were completely different environments, with completely different audiences. Our living conditions were different, too. What these trips had in common was that the audiences took us more seriously than our own audiences do at home.

**How did the trip impact the group's work?**

I think a trip like that tips off actors to certain issues in a unique way, and I don't think any actor can become aware of such fundamental intricacies unless they find themselves in such circumstances. The multifaceted nature of these trips can provide the best experiences and lessons for participating actors, in as much as they constantly have to beware not to swear off sensitivities and the chance to be creative under such highly unusual circumstances, otherwise, nothing of value will be left. We also know that the foremost medium of communication, which is language, is powerless on its surface level, and that an exchange between actor and the audience has to take place beyond words, which are meaningless sounds and movements that multiply the existing distance a hundredfold. Appreciating that reality and experiencing it can in my view be one of the most pregnant moments for every actor and perhaps the most important discovery that an actor may make in his/her career, of equal value to building a bridge between the hidden and the visible, between the intangible and the tangible.

## *A Knight*/Savāri: *Looking for an Unknown in Memory*

Fateh, *Tamasha*, 9 November 1976

**Mr. Ovanessian, as best I know, this is the first time there has been such a degree of collaboration among members of a theatre production group — writer, director, actor, even composer. How did you approach this work?**

I tried to look at my colleagues from a different angle in this production.

**How satisfied are you with the outcome, which is evidently a very new experience for you and the group?**

More satisfied than with our success in *Caligula*, because the elements that shaped *Caligula* represented the end of an era. This production, on the other hand, is the outgrowth of a need.

**Was it only you who felt the urge to work on and move toward a new theatrical era or did your actors and other colleagues in the ensemble also feel the need? Also, how have the actors responded to this phase?**

Naturally, the need arose in me first, but it couldn't be isolated from the interactions among the actors and across the ensemble.

**Why was the concept built on classical texts?**

Because they're the legacy of our cultural and spiritual heritage and can serve as a bridge. Hence, Ms. Tajadod's new writings[5] are also styled on classical sources.

[5] Twelve new texts produced by Mahin Tajadod consistent with themes suggested by the director and the actors while the play was in development were published by NITV (Soroush, 1976). The finalized play as performed, which incorporated some of that compilation in addition to classical texts, was never published. AO

We used the original form of old sources only where we wanted to repeat an allegory in full, such as in *Butterflies*, *Phoenix*, and *Mirror*, pieces that are direct citations from Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tair*. A few other fragments are also from Attar's *Divan* and Rumi's *Divan-e Shams*. In using these ostensibly disparate sources, our goal is to communicate the spirit that they have in common; we want to reflect the invisible thread that runs across these writings and concepts.

Imagine using the mechanism of *mosha'ereh* 'capping verses'[6] to create a play; the output will reflect the interaction between the participants. This play used a similar mechanism.

**I don't think language and dialogue can ever be a true reflection of one's sentiments. What do you think?**

One of my challenges and struggles in theatre has been language and resolving that problem. One reason for using authoritative sources is that their language carries a special potency.

**To what extent have you turned to mysticism in this work?**

There's no doubt that we were all looking for an unknown in our core and in our minds, and that the work reflects an inner, spiritual journey. But in no way was it our goal to iterate or give form to mystical concepts in the guise they are known and accepted. That's something that should flow freely from the spirit; it's either there or not. It's not a question of will — mine or my colleagues'.

**It appears that in the struggle between good and evil, you've taken the side of the good. Is that true?**

I don't know whether that's true or not. But I believe the good is more powerful.

**For location, you've chosen a space marked by a historical loftiness or special mythical aura, no doubt so it correlates with the textual sources of the play. Might it also be related to your siding with the good?**

No doubt the space is key to communicating the concepts. It has in fact played such a major role in the formation of the play that several scenes have been developed specifically with that space in mind, although the text as finalized can also be embodied differently elsewhere. In the performances that you saw at the Shiraz Arts Festival, that space and that tomb were the sources of a variety of concepts, some good, some evil. Fetters and freedom, love and hate, all manifested from that same source; both good and evil dwell in those rocks. Our treatment of the location can endow it with an added meaning and significance, or on the contrary, diminish its importance. That space could be a kind of temple. As to what kind of temple, the play itself is the resonance.

[6] A game that tests the participants' instant recall of poetry, also known in Latin and Arabic literary traditions. Player A recites a verse; player B has to recall a verse that begins with the last letter of A's verse, and so on until one player gives up.

## We Have Lost the Myth of Our Times

Zaven Qukasian, *Negin*, 22 October 1976

**Mr. Ovanessian, how do you think a modern artist should approach mythology?**

Myths are either alive in us or they're not, either they've gone to sleep in us or are awake. If we wish to intimate something that's more remote and elusive than the everyday veneer of life, we will inevitably run into the universe of myths. Whether dead or alive, they carry a message, or have an import, that is special. But we're no longer able to live with myths directly and have been forced into a give and take with the world of mythology through other symbiotic agencies.

**So, mythology cannot act as a pedestal for contemporary artists to stand on?**

No, because we don't have a myth of our times, or we have lost the myth of our times; we don't really know which myth may truly reflect our present condition.

**In *A Knight*/Savāri, you have made extensive visual use of poetry and succeeded in creating a long, theatrical poem.**

Yes, but not by visualizing the poems, rather, by getting to a certain type of movement, a sort of rest and motion and ascent and descent that produces a poetic zone. This work is the product of our streams of consciousness; it wasn't driven by a conscious will, nor predicated beforehand. The question was, if we established a relationship among ourselves and with literature and the past, what would its theatre be like? What kind of a form would it have, what kind of a text would it have? Other people may have ended up with a different experience in similar circumstances. No doubt about that.

As for me, I see a kind of authenticity in this work, that cultural and spiritual authenticity that is found in a nation of people. The Iranian consciousness has an intense predilection for being poetic. When the mind is allowed to roam freely, it inevitably brings along that world of poetry that is intrinsic to it.

**So, there's a kind of instinct that is also self-aware?**

Yes, awareness starts to intervene, not in the creative process but in its organization, in its arrangement, in perfecting it, in delineating its structure. That's a conscious decision, but creativity at that moment is a happening. That signal moment that can then be consciously developed, and it can mature.

**What stands out in the production is the role of the audience, which is instrumental in completing the meaning of the play and is decidedly a complementary factor.**

Yes, that's because when these texts are used in that context, the actor, writer, director, musician, all of them take a cue from the hints and implications that at that complementary point awaken the question in the mind of the audience. Ordinarily, that complementary point is

achieved through a story that usually serves as a bridge. A story helps instigate an interplay between the thoughts onstage and the audience's sentiments, and ideas begins to develop. But in our case, we do not have a story. When an actor intimates a text — a poem that's embedded in the audience's mind — certain concepts are inevitably stimulated by those images, by the hints and the innuendos, and a sort of dynamic gets underway in the actor's mind as well.

One of the properties of poetry is that it cannot be reduced to a single meaning and is always expandable. The only thing that remains constant in a poem over time is meter. So, while a poet may use specific meters, they're also free to express themselves as they wish. The form is fixed, but the content is the product of their own mind; other poets do the same thing using the same meters.

I believe that the Iranian consciousness is an abstract consciousness. The problem with telling a story is that a story can rarely encompass a question exhaustively. If you examine Iranian narrative formats, you find a frame story with a story within the story. And that is altogether an Eastern phenomenon. In all Iranian literature, you find allegories within allegories and stories within stories, from *Mantiq ut-Tair* to *Masnavi* to *One Thousand and One Nights*; there are no boundary lines. One story can be the starting point for another story. You see that in the decorations of mosques as well. Nothing ever runs into a dead end; the pattern always starts a movement within itself. If one were able to translate that into theatre, one could find a distinct theatrical format for Iranian theatre today.

**In fact, your entire production was continuous and had an interlocking chain structure.**

That's how we wanted it to be. That's why, to achieve such a structure, the work did not come down to exploiting one individual's mind. If it had been born of one individual's mind, it would have been limited to that person's mindset. In the final production, what we kept as the basic structure was one that could convey the maximum conceptual nuances.

One of the potentials of the work is that it could grow into a musical drama, meaning a play where like opera, music is a central feature — not opera in the European sense but a theatrical form where music, words, and visuals are equally at play. Wherever words are inadequate, music can enter; by contrast, where music becomes too abstract, words can compensate so that expression may be fully realized along a path that winds through the abstract and the concrete.

**In this production, you've made diametrically opposite uses of the elements at your disposal, for instance, the child emerges from the same place as light, the same spot where the chain that harnesses purity issues from.**

True, opposition is one of the conceptual nuclei of this production. It started with the myth that was used for this work, according to which if the power that had been chained were unleashed, it would either destroy the world, or conversely, restore it. That is like the duality in fire, which can both purify and cleanse, and it can scorch and destroy; same as water, it can be purifying, and it can also destroy everything in a deluge. A natural force is always the crucible of opposing forces; it's both destructive and constructive; even the myth of Prometheus bespeaks that opposition; thus, exactly the moment when Prometheus promises freedom to human beings by bringing them fire, he himself is fettered in chains; so, the exact opposite of

what he's just accomplished happens.

Let me paint you a very natural picture. The sky is always red when black is turning to white, or light is turning to darkness, which is to say that the presence of blood, the presence of life, the presence of the color red, occurs at the moment when these two, darkness and light, trade places in opposition to one another.

The conceptual foundation of most religions is that these polar opposites are inseparable and eternal; it's only our relationship to them that identifies them as either destructive or constructive, depending on when and where we position each. Like a fire that you light in the dark to find your way can also function as a signal for the enemy who lies along the path and doesn't know your whereabouts and destroy you.

So, that opposition is abiding. You see, there's always opposition between the presence of darkness and light; even clearer than the opposition between darkness and light is death, which can either be enlightening or dark and obscure. A tomb, a shrine, can be the source of life and it can be the source of dissolution.

Accordingly, in this structure, when that source is drawn on, multiple forms unfold over and over. Love emerges from there, the sword emerges from there, as the source of death . . . that is where the Phoenix turns to, that is where the child emerges from. All these can entail their converse allusion.

**Opposition repeatedly appears throughout the production, for instance, the black-clad man completes the white-clad man, and vice versa.**

Right. None of these are ever absolutely and thoroughly good or evil. They're evocations in certain guises; they're not fixed models of goodness or evil, just like stars in the night sky, for example, that are signs of light in darkness; the presence of light in the sky at night. Same thing in daytime; shadows are a sign of darkness in daylight. The configurations in this play share the exact same quality. For instance, there are signs of evil in the man clad in white, and vice versa, there are signs of goodness and light in the black-clad man.

**Even more interesting is the fact that whenever this oppositional pair (white-clad and black-clad) come face-to-face, they become meaningful.**

Yes, like the scene of Satan, which is repeated twice and where they exchange clothes. Like night and day that alternate, this never ends.

**The character of the female figure is not reducible to a single type, either in your previous works or in this production where women inhabit broader dimensions compared to the other characters and where Biblical women carry the most weight. I think you're always averse to portraying women as one-dimensional. I also think your view of women is ambiguous.**

As far as the weight of Biblical women, that wasn't a very conscious choice. But there's no doubt that female figures are ambiguous and more mysterious in my works. In this particular play, there are three types of women. One is a mother figure, another is a lover (in its exalted

sense), an incorporeal entity who establishes the most distant relationship with an earthling — she's like a star whose gravitational force keeps certain elements on Earth in balance — and the third is a prostitute, who can be "known" by everyone. Those are the women in this play.

Woman is the source of birth and in this work, we come to an actual creation; we see a creature who is born without female agency. Of course, such a thing is impossible without contact between a man and a woman, for in nature the source of birth is always woman. Presenting that reality and its antithesis in this work was a conscious choice on my part; what I had in mind was the Active Intellect that Jami discusses in *Salamān va Absāl*.

As for the female religious myths that you mention that idea sprang from my mind and from the encounter between my mind and my colleagues in a natural process; it's not the product of something prefigured and specific. It wasn't fantasized; the group played around with the idea, but the myths are true to their original sources — same as these poems and words that are sourced from various books — except they had not been synthesized in that way before. The synthesis has brought out another dimension in them, and in that synthesis, they reflect a particular universe.

## In Theatre, I Always Look For Life

Albert Kuchouie, *Javanan-e Rastakiz Newspaper*, 30 March & 16 April 1978

**With your production of *Research*/Pazhuheshi, you proved that you want to steer people to the stage by provoking firestorms and furor. With your film, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, we witnessed a new brouhaha, but this time you transfixed the audience's gaze on the screen. You showed that you're always aspiring to a contrarian and scandalous theatre, a theatre that runs counter to theatrical trends. Why?**

Yes, I'm always for being different in my work, not different in the sense of inciting clashes and commotion, but as in grappling with impactful social issues, meaning being alive. At a time when no-one cares about theatre or may have even forgotten it, a contrarian and novel work can bring attention to it and serve as a wake-up call to people who dismiss theatre and assume it's dead.

In those days, I believed that the kind of theatre that was being presented in Iran was one-dimensional and unduly committed to a constricted intellectual and formal vision. Given such a state of affairs, I felt the need for a shakeup, like when someone is asleep and needs to be wakened. That's why *Research*/Pazhuheshi was staged.

**Your name has always been associated with scandal, which begs the question what it is that you're after, events that bring about bedlam?**

I've never condoned eliciting scandals in theatre or cinema. If that's how I've been perceived, it could be because my work is different from others'. It goes without saying that anytime a director or playwright breaks with the theatrical status quo, they have to confront the anger of their peers. It's like my proclaiming that the theatrical language you have learned is wrong and dead; at that point, anyone accustomed to their particular theatrical language is going to protest because their endeavors will suddenly seem trivial and hollow. Those protests are cur-

sory and transitory, though, because after a while, the protesters will inevitably be absorbed by the supporters. Artistic and theatrical platforms are in constant need of differences and differentiation. An artistic work should always diverge from popular expectations. Standing on a platform that accommodates the majority will never breed new developments. A society that is incapable of envisioning a horizon that is beyond and father and wider is anemic. Artistic endeavors can invigorate a society.

**From the start, Crossroads (CRT) has tried to show that it's a different kind of theatre. Is CRT striving for an ideal, vibrant relationship between the audience and the actor?**

A theatre that doesn't want to die has to be constantly divergent. Every so often, one must move in the opposite direction to society. I believe that every vibrant theatrical entity needs those kinds of experiences, especially in Iran where theatre has not had a long history. Given that theatre is a Western borrowing, our society had not grown used to it yet. Hence, many people who go to the theatre only randomly and don't consider it vital to their everyday life. In some other cultures, large numbers of people consider theatre vital to their everyday affairs.

**CRT opened with *The Sleeper's Den* and *Funny Old Man*, two plays by unknown playwrights. How do you believe those plays relate to Iranian audiences?**

These plays introduce two new writers and two different approaches; furthermore, their forms of expression are diametrically opposed. These playwrights are noteworthy from the standpoint of their theatrical expression and qualities, and now we can get to know their personal styles and methods.

The two plays examine ordinary people's lives under special circumstances: there is something unhealthy that is not easy to ignore; the relationships among these people are problematic. Peter Gill's *The Sleeper's Den* has a handful of individuals in a closed space indoors whose human relationships are destroyed by the outside world; the daughter longs for her mother to die and vice versa. Deep down, the characters don't want such a thing to happen, but certain factors spawn those incidences, questions that are left unresolved in the play; it's up to the audience to find the answers. *Funny Old Man* by Tadeusz *Różewicz is the story of an old man who had witnessed war in his youth*; *the consequent socio-political transformations have thrown his personal relationships off balance as well.*

The questions that are posed in these two plays all reflect specific conditions during off-balance times and examine the effect of these conditions on different individuals. Both plays zero in on death, an unnatural and untimely death — like this suffocating air in our own city. Where did this meddler come from, and why has he come? Death that ought to be part of our life naturally has turned into an intruder that destroys life forcibly.

Lastly, I believe these two plays are relevant to our daily life today and can help put certain intimate aspects of our lives on the examination table.

## Crossroads: *Where Experimental and Non-Experimental Theatre Meet*

Fereidun Taheri, *Tamasha*, 1, 8, and 22 June 1978

**Crossroads Theatre/*Chahar-su* (CRT) was born out of what cultural imperative, exactly?**

From the outset, one of TW's goals was to make it possible for people who wanted to collaborate on experimental theatre to go on and form their own groups after a while once they had achieved results, and, conceivably, carry on in independent theatres. During that period, we, too, developed plays for City Theatre (CT). However, the outsize proportions of the stage made it impossible for any group to continually mount high quality and exigent productions there and grow. The demands of the stage put a pressure on the group that impedes creativity. The space exerts certain rules and criteria that are very restrictive and an obstacle to growth. A more feasible performance stage was needed to make growth possible.

With that in mind, the idea of building independent centers for these groups to work in was discussed on numerous occasions, but nothing concrete materialized. Then at one point when CT was closed for repairs, it was proposed to turn its parking space into a small theatre. That space was proposed because the cost of construction there would have been considerably less than building a new and separate structure elsewhere. Plus, a small theatre adjacent to CT would have been complementary from a programming standpoint and compensated for works that were unsuitable for a large stage. Finally, it would cost less to run such a complex than to operate an independent theatre. That proposal was approved. The theatre was constructed, and the program was developed in consultation with our group that had previously left TW. This was in effect a continuation of the policy that we had initiated at TW, except it was now more developed.

Crossroads Theatre is an intersection, a point of contact between an experimental and a more expansive theatre that relates more closely to the audience. We wanted a space that could integrate these two kinds of theatre within reasonable dimensions and be able to function and offer productions of a distinct quality throughout the year.

**Naturally, what you pointed out needs a particular outlook on programming. Ultimately, how can that outlook be relevant to our theatre as a whole?**

In today's world, theatre cannot function in isolation. A kind of international theatre has been emerging around the world over the last decade and one can see its echo in every country. From Japan to the United States, from East to West, a particular kind of theatre is being born that is the result of that fusion. Being at the crossroads of these developments, we cannot remain indifferent and turn our back; it is incumbent upon us to be informed about what is happening around the world.

Not all that is novel is on the same level. One event may attract attention chiefly through publicity and may therefore be questionable, another may attract less publicity. I personally believe that kind of theatre to be more valuable and impactful, which is why we looked for the literature that braces that kind of theatre. Playwrights who are dealing with the human condition today are not well known around the world, but their lack of fame doesn't mean their work is less worthwhile; they might very well gain recognition over time and become tomorrow's celebrated authors. Rather than wait for others to recognize them and for us to then discover them through publicity, we search those grounds on our own and seek out writ-

ers whose plays have little chance of being performed in theatres and are typically forgotten, despite being worthy. We look for and find those writers and produce their works. That is why our programming for the opening season, and conceivably for the second, will follow that policy.

Based on the above, we are even revisiting the famous works of well-known writers and have started examining their less well-known works to see whether those were indeed less worthy or whether their worth was underappreciated due to certain circumstances. Indeed, we have found plays that may be more relevant today than the more famous works of the same authors in regards creativity, subject matter, and the potential bearing on our current conditions. I don't mean Iran's alone. For us, the question is more inclusive. In studying the texts, we are finding some that although less well-known are more expressive and intelligible and more extendable to our environment. We have thus collected a lot of texts that we will work on gradually and which will form the corpus of our offerings.

That is a choice that we ourselves have made. As such, we are no longer a mere echo of what's happening in other theatres around the world; we pursue a vision and an objective that is our own. I don't personally know a single playhouse in the world whose objective is to discover and produce such a class of plays. By discovering and producing such plays, including less appreciated classical texts, we want to know whether or not we can achieve a kind of theatre that represents a theatre of our times. This will automatically motivate Iranian writers who want to join us on this path. People who are interested in working with us and like the quality of our work can collaborate with us. Indeed, a few have already started writing plays for us.

We are always looking for Iranian plays that can hold up internationally, that is, plays that can also be performed in other countries. Unfortunately, most of our dramatic literature — most, not all — are impossible to translate, by which I mean, they're too domestic, which can be a strength, but it can equally be a weakness because it belongs to a worldview that is not autonomous enough for the play not to lose some of its value in translation.

Most of our plays are nearly impossible to present on an international stage in translation. I think one of the reasons is our lack of contact with living theatre around the world. Our writers follow certain classical conventions and formats in drama that have long lost their vitality. So, copying such models inevitably renders their works sterile. We do not have a theatre that is in touch with the pulse of the dramatic arts in today's world. We do not have playwrights capable of communicating domestic issues on a par with international issues. Maybe this way, the way we're looking at CRT, will help us build an intersection. Maybe that intersection will cause a newer movement or perspective take root in our contemporary dramatic literature.

**To what extent are CRT's other activities such as film screenings, exhibitions, and musical performances, related to the kind of theatre that is promoted there?**

First of all, there's a kind of music that needs a smaller space to better express itself; that kind of music has much less of a chance to be performed in other venues. We make it possible for CRT to be used that way.

Secondly, that kind of music coming into contact with theatre should not be underestimated in terms of cultivating theatre professionals and the audience; there are indeed people who go to the theatre and are not interested in music and others who are interested in music but don't go to the theatre. Presenting these two activities side by side generates a mixed audience;

music lovers start to go to the theatre as well. That's important.

The same is true of cinema. We don't tend to films, which can be screened in other venues, unless we wanted to highlight a subject or a group of filmmakers because of their impact in the world of cinema. CRT is not devoted to films like a cinematheque but screens films for a specific purpose, like comparing German realist cinema and contemporary realist theatre in Germany in our programs. Whether these two have influenced one another and to what extent they counter or complement each other is an interesting subject to explore. Or, to what extent were Eisenstein's works inspired by the theatre of his time and what was new in his vision? In the last years of his life, how closely did his work approach opera and theatre in regards mise en scène? A retrospective of his films at a venue that is designated a theatre and offers performance space and live theatrical productions can on the whole help round out our work.

That also applies to exhibitions, which directly and indirectly form a bridge between theatrical products and corollary artistic activities such as design, make-up, and so forth.

The actors who serve on the Programming Committee have been working together and have attained a knowledge of theatre that can be decisive. The fruit of their eight-year experience is integral to their decision making, it's integral to CRT's policies. There's a great difference between these actors and others that collaborate with us as guest artists for limited periods. It's like the relationship between the members of a family and their neighbors. The relationships between the members of a family are qualitatively different.

## I Reflected the Sensibilities of My Own Generation[7]

Mohammad Abdi, *Rouz Network* (London), 28 November 2008

**Mr. Ovanessian, you had a modern and avant-garde outlook at TW. What were the roots of that outlook and what were you influenced by?**

I wasn't influenced by anything. I belonged to my own generation. I had seen a lot of plays, as well as films during my student years. But what I created wasn't influenced by what I had seen. On the contrary, it was about what type of work should I avoid and what type of work do I like to see on stage. I wanted to work on film or theatre only in keeping with how I felt, not on an agenda that I wanted to be avant-garde and progressive and different. I reflected the potentials and sensibilities of my own generation. If that sounds avant-garde or modern, I don't identify with that thought.

**What were the reactions to that outlook, which in any event diverged radically from the dominant outlook in those days and pointed to a different world and can thus be called *avant-garde*?**

Very natural . . . Most established theatre professionals and film directors were critical, though there were some who saw the need for this work; among them were even people like Bijan

[7] This interview followed a seminar at the Barbican Center in London where former TW colleagues, Arby Ovanessian, Iraj Anvar, Mohammad Baqer Ghaffari, Shohreh Aghdashloo, and Susan Taslimi were invited to participate.

Mofid who did not work in their conventional style . . . Of course, such reactions had also occurred in other periods. It's the same today; some people are supportive, and some people are critical. This always happens whenever conventions are breached, until imitations begin and replace the original attitudes and become a new routine. The reactions to TW do not reflect a specific era; it's always like that.

**What about audience reaction? It's said you disliked seeing a large turnout in the hall . . . Rumor has it that if more than twenty turned up, you'd get anxious, as in 'Why? Something's got to be wrong!'**

No, that's not how it was. It wasn't that I thought something was wrong. I'd say one has to take that fact seriously. Either the audience is on to something and relating to it, or they're there merely out of curiosity. Is it a genuine relationship? I posed that as a question.

The truth is that by and large, most popular products are not of high quality, or very rarely so . . . So, if it's generally been observed that a work is too complex for some, then that is a serious question from a cultural and an artistic perspective and one has to pay attention to it. That was my goal.

# Theatre
# IV

# Selected Writings of Arby Ovanessian

## Miss Julie[1]

November 1967

Strindberg's play is a dance of death. A delicate and dreadful dance that unfolds in a cold and sick milieu and which is, formally, a classic ancient tragedy.

Jean and Julie are moving in two completely opposite directions and because they have equal powers, the confrontation ends in total failure and tragedy.

In Sweden, midsummer night is the merriest time of the year. In some regions, it's customary to offer an animal sacrifice when the dancing and revelry ends. In Strindberg's play, following the dance, the woman, the bird, and finally the man — humankind as a whole — are sacrificed one after another.

Having freed itself from bondage to the ancient gods, humanity has become captive to its own covenants. The significance of Strindberg's play is first and foremost that it establishes a direct and renewed contact with ancient theatre. His theatre is in essence a theatre of rites and rituals.

This production is an attempt to show that simple complexity.

## A Modern, Profound and Important Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era

### by Abbas Nalbandian[2]

. . . a play by a young writer who has never seen a play performed. Nalbandian by using the techniques of the surrealists, writes a "collage" of famous sayings and ideas.

*Eight characters are searching . . .*

*Their aims and needs are different. They get acquainted, they travel, they exchange ideas, they each live a unique life, they make a show out of their lives, they die and get resurrected, they keep going without getting anywhere; "there is no one to help . . ."*

*This naive, simple, and straightforward "idea" in Nalbandian's play has gained power and beauty.*

*"A Modern, Profound and Important Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era" has strong Theatrical Logic.*

[1] Program notes.

[2] Reproduced verbatim from the English-language program notes for the Shiraz Arts Festival (5 Sep. 1968) and subsequent presentations at IAS/Tehran in Dec.

*This production fuses a variety of old and new theatrical techniques. By using Greek and Oriental ritual, character and method acting, the alienation effect, etc., the basic aim of this production is to create and communicate through pure Theatrical Logic . . .*

## Journal entries: *Research*/Pazhuheshi [excerpts, 6 Apr. 1968- 3 Jan. 1969][3]

**April 6, 1968**

*Research*/Pazhuhesi is a text that one can "play with," in the broader sense of that term.

I have proposed, if they agree, to stage this play.

I think I've found what I've been looking for.

Some say it isn't theatre at all.

Totally wrong. It's pure theatre.

**April 8**

I met Nalbandian.

They ask him, "Why did you write it?"

He says, "I don't know."

They ask, "Why did you send it?"

He says, "For money."

I ask, "Once you wrote it, did you like it?"

He says, "Yes."

I have my answer.

The text can be "staged". That "has to be" my goal. To "stage" it, one may use whatever approach works. Theatre is the issue.

An experimental production. Need to be courageous.

**May 17**

The production needs a single image and space.

A ball of twine, pieces of crumpled paper in earthen tones to represent rocks in the cave, and chains suspended from above. The image is missing something; I'm not satisfied.

The stage design has yet to be found.

The text should be condensed into a few lines or a volume. While designing, the lines get

[3] Reproduced in NITV *Cultural Journal*, Mar. 1969; reprinted in *Ayandegan*, 3 May 1969.

jumbled. Might this summarize the complexity of the play's "unknown"?

A cave is an enclosed space; a full circle can convey this enclosure visually.

The characters should take form there like an embryo. But the space should be totally neutral and synthetic.

Aluminum has just such a quality and will support the metaphysical spirit of the play.

"I swear in the name of the God of the Kaaba, I am relieved"[4] should be the point of entry.

**May 26**

Meeting all the actors who have come together for the first time. It feels the required harmony can be achieved with this group.

They read the script.

Their voices are compatible with the characters they are to "play".

The actors ought to have idiosyncrasies; however, those distinctions should be brought to function as an interrelated whole. Their singularities will lose their impact and sense within the overall structure of the production.

The production should have such a unified composition that were we to eliminate a single fragment of the text, the pieces would fall apart.

The fabric of the play is genuine and represents the author's mental anguish. One should not forget that.

Each actor should "self-consciously" describe their past to the others with the help of the text and "act it out". After making their entrance, each actor should put on a play for the others. Show themselves off, that's the point. The display of these variegated "selves" should blend together.

There is no reason for this blending to be logical; it's enough for an imaginal and poetic logic to form through rhythm, color, and mood. It's enough for the audience to be taken in by the mood. They don't need to intellect the mood.

Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tair* can serve as a model.

**June 5**

Nalbandian comes to the rehearsals; he keeps silent. I can tell by looking at him which part he's happy with and which part he dislikes.

He doesn't talk at all; one has to read his thoughts indirectly.

**June 7**

I describe the costume designs to the actors. They can easily use their costumes to communicate their characters.

[4] Imam Ali's last words after he is fatally struck by Ibn Muljam, used by Nalbandian as an epigraph for his play.

Nalbandian is disturbed by the prostitute's costume. He says, "When people see a woman like that, they'll laugh." I tell him, "Iranians are familiar with images of women in short, stiff skirts, which were in fact copied by order of Nassereddin Shah from tutus of European ballerinas. . . I don't think this costume will cause gratuitous laughter. What I'm looking for is a joke, a bitter joke. There's a bitter joke in the costumes of all the characters. These jokes are sometimes very personal and sometimes very generic."

He thinks for a moment and says, "Do as you see fit."

**June 13**

In terms of diction, the text has found the right rhythm and tone.

The prostitute's diction has some issues. It ought to deliver a "whorish" mindset; the other characters achieved the right tone and rhythm more easily. It needs work . . .

I won't change the dialogue at all – I'll try to offset it in the bigger picture.

**June 22**

We rehearsed Act 1 with blockings.

I have the blockings outlined in my mind. I'll try to develop some through improvisation as well. Some of those come effortlessly.

I've realized I should use some of the actors' unconscious moves. I asked them to feel freer in how they move.

Sometimes my composition completely falls apart. The problem must be tackled calmly.

**June 30**

Blocking Act 1 is almost complete and can be fine-tuned to achieve the right balance between movements and diction.

From this point on, the actors should be led in such a way that they pay less attention to the subject matter. The only thing that matters is the overall mood.

From now on, every instant should appear logical to me theatrically, without any other consideration.

**July 12**

*From now on, every instant should appear logical to me theatrically, without any other consideration* — aided by this thought, the beginning of Act 2 finds its sense.

The director in the play is a dictator, a bad-tempered dictator. I'm an affable dictator. The director in the play has to become a caricature.

The whole director and actors' scene gels.

**July 19**

The production has come into its own. I like certain moments of it. I believe it works.

Act 1 flows well visually and rhythmically and Act 2 starts with a different flow. So, the rhythm of the performance having broken down, the rhythm of the rest of Act 2, which is in total harmony with Act 1, acquires a different mood and significance. This is an interesting point. The idea could be exploited later.

The performers' "acting out" in Act 1 is theatrical while in Act 2, it's wholly devotional and ritualistic. This is an organic development, and it is in the opposite direction to the genesis and development of theatre in history.

**July 30**

The Arts Festival committee has come to see the rehearsal. We performed it in tattered clothes. The performances were relatively better than in previous rehearsals. The general atmosphere came across. The reactions were interesting. For me, a second puzzle loomed in the room. I liked the performance but couldn't read their thoughts.

They were smiling and saying nothing.

They said goodbye and left.

**August 4**

The Arts Festival committee has endorsed the production.

Work must continue as before but naturally with closer attention. One shouldn't blow things out of proportion and panic.

I have to build a model of the set to help the actors get a better feel for the performance space.

**August 14**

It will be presented in Shiraz in open air.

We should run rehearsals in open air. We must be careful not to upset the current atmosphere. The distance with the audience should be taken into account.

**August 24**

We rehearse in full costume for the first time. All the visual jests work. "Fellini," "Bergman," "Bunuel," "Pirandello," "Nassereddin Shah," "ta'ziyeh," "Siyavash at Persepolis," and a few other figures or subjects that have been parodied easily get across. Will anyone get that?

Like the play, the production has borrowed from different sources but without putting them in quotation marks.

What sort of reactions will the markedly theatrical climate of this play elicit?

Will those who had originally questioned the potential of the play admit they were wrong and that the staging challenges of this text can be resolved through intuition, especially with the help of Artaud's theories?

Theatre has its own unique and intuitive logic.

**August 28**

The last rehearsal in Tehran.

The rehearsal ran smoothly.

Looks like it has the desired effect on the audience.

A number of people had come to watch the rehearsal tonight; they liked it. A few said, 'It was interesting, but we didn't get it.' Do they have to get it?

Keep in mind that "a beautiful puzzle is what it's about."

**September 4**

At midnight, we assembled at the Hafeziyeh Open Air Stadium in Shiraz, so we could run one rehearsal onstage before the actual performance.

The rehearsal began at 3 AM.

Hafeziyeh Stadium was pitch black and only the beams of a few spotlights projected onto the circle centerstage were visible.

It was cold, and the actors were tired. They took naps during the rehearsal — it was a very interesting and beautiful fatigue.

The rehearsal ended at 5 AM.

Amazingly, just as the play ended, dawn broke in sync with the final calls of "Zamenhof, Zamenhof," and the sky lightened. That did it for me.

My work is done.

**September 5**

The performance ran very smoothly.

Audience reaction was astonishing. Some said it's a scam and some said it's a masterpiece. Both are mistaken and super-agitated.

A number of theatre actors from the Ministry of Culture that ran into us after the performance didn't return our greetings.

That kind of reaction is good.

From now on, we must all know ourselves through the perspective of others.

**September 8**

Inside Pahlavi University Hall in Shiraz, the debates about the production took a dreadful and childish turn. It's a shame. Nobody is interested in throwing light on the subject; it's full throttle individualism and noise. It makes me laugh. The play is being replayed in the hall, as it were.

Everyone is an A kh sh i g.[5]

**September 16**

The production wins the National Iranian Television Prize at the Shiraz Arts Festival. Is this a reward, or a warning not to be dragged into futility?

Another puzzle for me.

### *On the production in Tehran*

**December 15, 1968**

The play was staged in Tehran for the first time.

The production has improved in terms of atmosphere; the acting is smoother and flows better. The new Khogāshi sings the song very well but you can tell he's had fewer rehearsals than the others.

Audience reaction is unhealthy. They no longer assail or acclaim spontaneously . . . as if they feel unsure of themselves. It's horrible.

**December 20**

During Act 2 (after "Khogāshi's" song) a group of people heckled and hurled profanities. There was confusion in the house and onstage. The audience asked the agitators to leave the hall. The actors were very distraught and angry; some were crying. . . I wasn't bothered at all, maybe I'd expected it. Nalbandian looked awfully disheartened.

**December 23**

Tonight, some people taunted the actors, so, feeling insulted, they did not come out at the end to take a bow. They were very distraught, so I had to go onstage myself. People took that to be the curtain call and applauded very warmly. I asked them to quiet down and said, "When certain members of the audience learn how to behave in a theatre, then the actors will express their appreciation." A few people objected that "not everybody was part of the tease." Somebody replied, "Everybody in the hall is responsible."

**January 3, 1969**

The run of the play is over.

For me, it has been over for a long time and feels more like a duty. Except for the first few nights, I could have done without the rest.

---

[5] Nalbandian created the names of his eight principle characters using different combinations of the letters in the Persian word *ākhshij* (also *ākhshig*), pl. *ākhshijan,* which means 1) 'element': fire, air, water, and earth, "*chahar ākhshijan*," and 2) 'opposition, antagonism,' and transliterated them into Latin script as: "I: Ākhsheig, II: Khashāgei; III: Khogāshi; IV: Sheigākh; V: Geishākh; VI: Yokhshāg; VII: Yoshākhog; VIII: Yegoshkhā".

The only thing that was interesting and worth reflection was the reactions; the theatrical performance put on by some of the audience was more engaging. Can theatre always be like that?

## Handke's Plays[6]

Handke has found the sense of **play** in **play**ing with senses.

Each of these three pieces illustrates a kind of **play** set up by the author in a particular way; Handke's philosophy of theatre comes down to participating in the **play**.

The task assigned to the actor and the director is to participate in the **play**.

Each of these **play**s is in effect a puzzle, where finding the answer is perhaps less important than the process that brings out the solution by participating in the **play**. The reader of these *Three Pieces* is automatically pushed to **play**.

It is a rare **play** that invites readers to automatically participate in a **play**.

Should a reader decline to **play**, they're automatically eliminated from **play**ing and therefore miss out on the **play**. It's up to the reader to hit or miss to **play** or not to **play**. That's why Handke's **play**s are pure **play**s.

## *All at Once*/Nāgahan[7]

> "And that night seventy people saw the Prophet — peace be upon him — in a dream who said, 'The friend of God, Zulnoon, shall come. We bid him welcome.' When he died, it was inscribed on his forehead in green, *All at Once, A Friend of God, Died in the Love of God, Slain by God, Died by the Sword of God.*"
>
> -Attar, *Tazkirat ul-awlia*

Among Iranian playwrights, I find Nalbandian to be complementary. He provides the actors and the director with good dramatic material. One can play with his texts on different levels, from the trite to the serious. *All at Once*/Nāgahan has a broader and deeper meaning that is universal. It's good material to work with.

We had at least three different forms for staging it. The goal was to gradually reach a form that had not been imposed on the text or on the actors based on my personal vision and value judgments. The form and the underlying concept of the production at Delgosha Pavilion is tied to that specific space; our work found its form in that space. Needless to say, a future production in different circumstances will have a form that will naturally echo the Delgosha Pavilion but will not copy or reproduce it. We adopted an open-ended approach to this production. We subscribed to the framework of the text's potentials. We tried to determine

[6] Translation of "Baziha-ye Handke," Ovanessian's "Introduction" in *Three Pieces, Peter Handke's Plays,* tr. from the English by Abbas Nalbandian. Tehran: NITV Publishing/Theatre Workshop, May 1972. The three plays are *Self-Accusation, Calling for Help,* and *My Foot My Tutor.*

[7] Excerpts of journal entries, first published in *Tamasha*, 6th Shiraz Arts Festival daily bulletin, 2 Sep. 1972.

where we fitted in the play as a production group and see what concepts we could extract from the text.

*

I can only talk about my sense of theatre. As I see it, aided by an impulse that has no tangible form, certain elements, certain living beings, initiate a movement that becomes incarnated at once in the present. This movement suddenly causes the hidden to be released. And when this release occurs, it is automatically experienced. It's a part of life that "is," "was," but that we were not aware of. That's why I think one can feel life more truthfully in theatre. More truthfully, heavier, and lighter. That's why it's possible to play more, to transmute more. And whenever such transmutation occurs, that's when I sense what theatre is about.

*

I'd be interested to see how far this work may go, what mutations and transformations it will undergo. If it stops to evolve it will be because we — as the production team — have not been able to take it farther, or that we have had shortcomings. What's important for me at this particular point in time is to be able to continually present these mutations and transformations as a living theatrical reality. And for a text that appears to have a final and finished form, that idea is rather seductive.

## About *Caligula*[8]

Before Caligula dies, he shatters the mirror that reflects his image.

What does this act mean?

What does the shattering mean?

Is there a connection between schizophrenia, 'broken heart/mind,' and what happened to Caligula after the death of his sister?

It seems 'broken heart' and 'broken mirror' signify the same thing.

But what?

Could Camus' *Caligula* theatrically incarnate what is in question?

This production attempts to answer these questions.

## *The Lady with a Little Dog* [9]

*The Lady with a Little Dog* is a short story about two ordinary people. It is a simple story told

[8] Published in the 1974 Shiraz Arts Festival catalogue, and in CT (Tehran) program notes.

[9] Program notes, *The Lady with a Little Dog*. Co-production: Festival d'Automne and Centre Georges Pompidou, 10-13 Nov. 1979. Stage adaptation, design and direction: Arby Ovanessian, with Paloma Matta as *Anna Sergeyevna,* Sacha Pitoëff as *Dimitri Dimitritch. Music*: Shostakovich Quartets/excerpts, Borodin Quartet/Tchaikovsky, *Why?* (after Heine). *Voice*: Galina Vichnevskaia. *Piano*: Mstislav Rostropovitch.

with extreme sensitivity. A sensitivity that makes it sparkle like the ephemeral flame of a match that during a brief moment lights a candle and dies out . . . then there is a surge that penetrates the darkness. The space begins to change, to multiply, to transform, engulf us and, like a contagious disease, conquer the weak. But during this time something is born, something happens to us, something changes. An intimate secret is shared with us through this turn of events, is communicated to us, which nevertheless remains a mystery that cannot be expressed in words. It belongs to that realm where the mysterious silences of Chekhov originate.

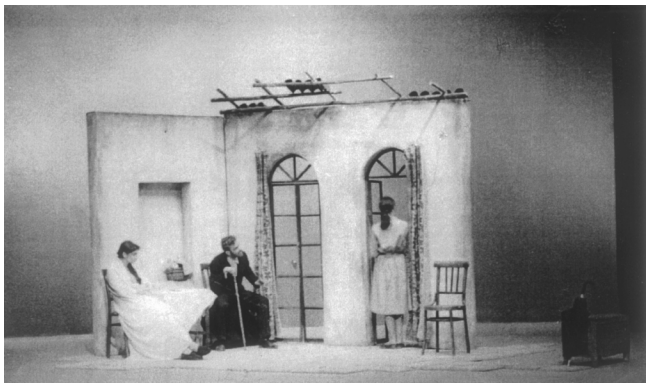
This stage adaptation of Chekhov's well-known masterpiece attempts, by theatrical means and by using static time, moving time, and Chekhov's vocabulary, to recreate and communicate these mysterious silences by a play that he never wrote.

# Theatre

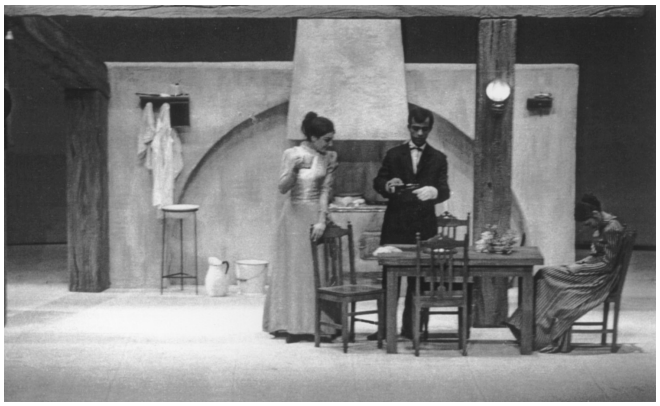
# V

# Images / Theatre

**1966. *The Blue Outlet*, Akbar Radi**
Iran America Society



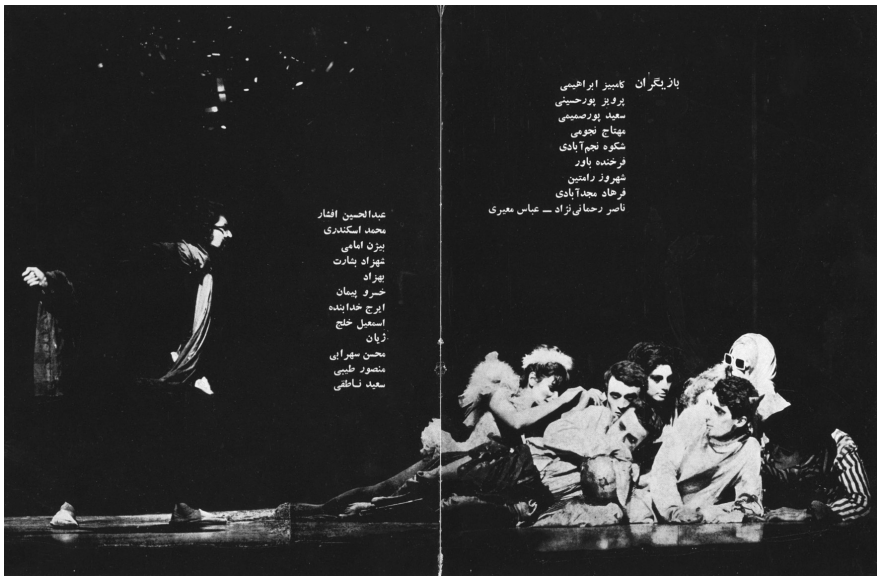
**1967. *Miss Julie,* August Strindberg**
Iran America Society

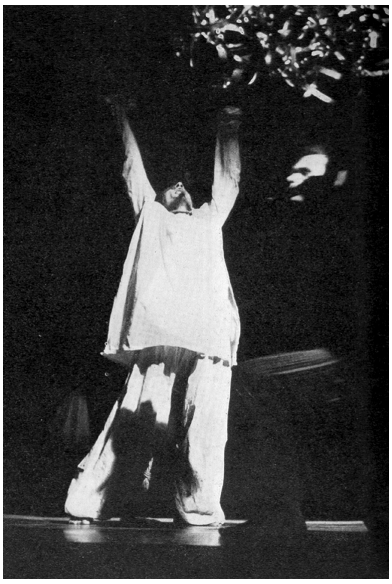


L-R: Miss Julie, Jean, Christine

**1968. *The Respectable Beggars,* Hakop Baronian**
Iran America Society

**1968. *Research*/Pazhuheshi, Abbas Nalbandian**
World Premiere, Open-Air Theatre, Hafeziyeh Stadium, Second Shiraz Arts Festival



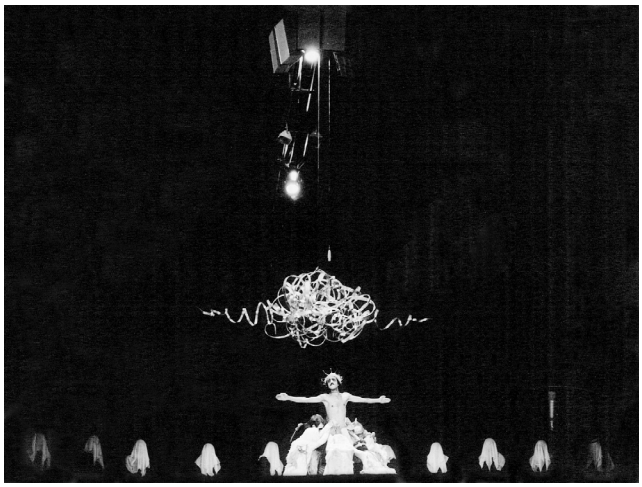



Cast. Part II: The "Director" bawls at the "Actors":
Ākhsheig, Khashāgei, Khogāshi, Sheigākh, Geishākh, Yokhshāg, Yoshākhog, Yegoshkhā

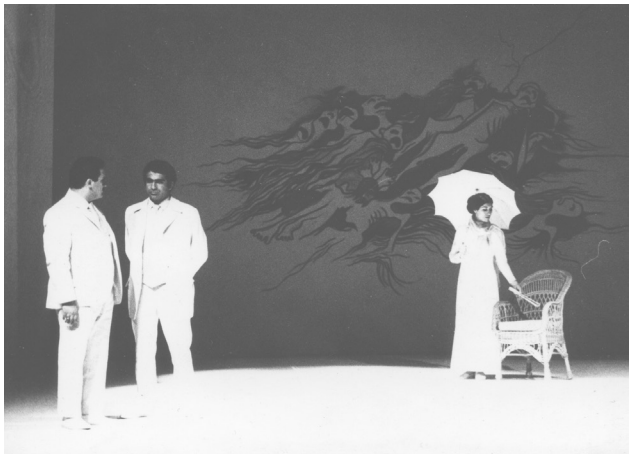
"Director," "Actors," and twelve "Assistant Directors"

Standing L-R: Khogāshi, Ākhsheig

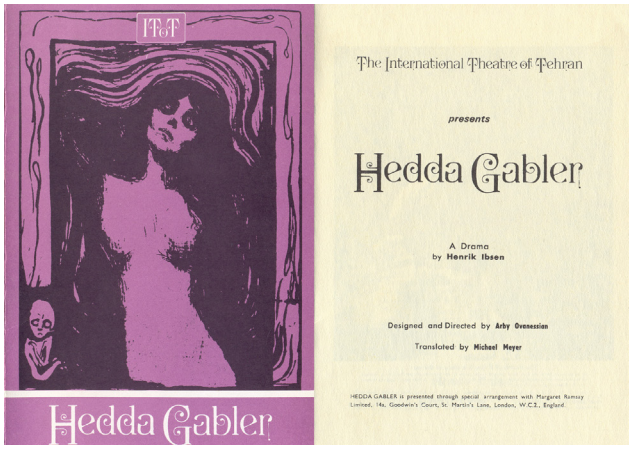
Khogāshi singing



**1969. *On the Way*, Levon Shant**
Iran America Society



**1969. *Hedda Gabler*, Henrik Ibsen**
Iran America Society




International Theatre of Tehran

Photo: Richard Dixon

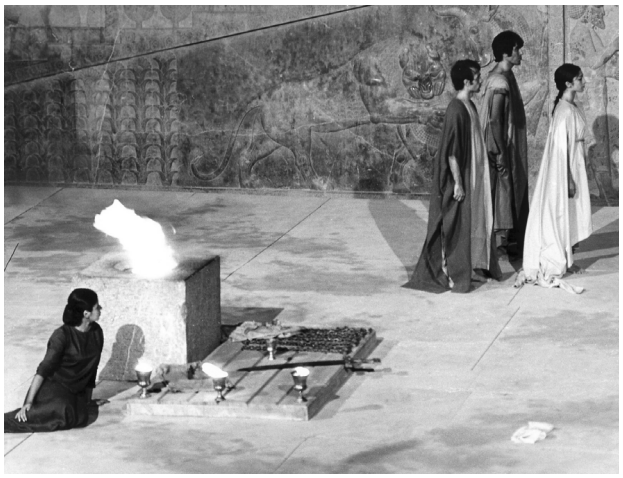
**1970. *Vīs o Ramin*, Mahin Jahanbegloo (Tajadod)**
World premiere, Fourth Shiraz Arts Festival, timed with the setting sun

Photo: Mehdi Khansari

The characters wander about Apadana Palace at sunset.
Photo: Mehdi Khansari

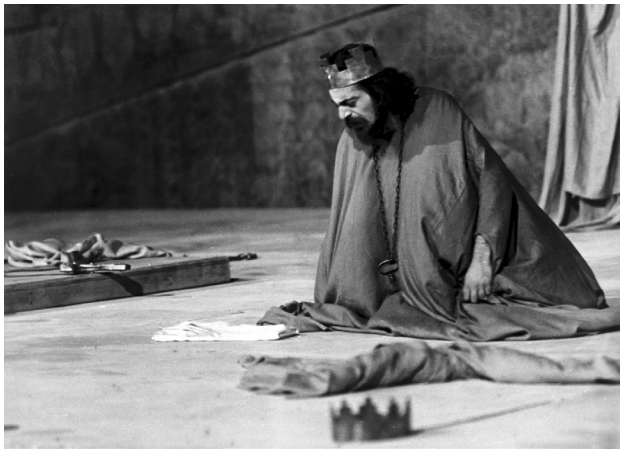
Vīs emerges from Apadana Palace.

R. Vīs waiting to be born.
Photos: Mehdi Khansari

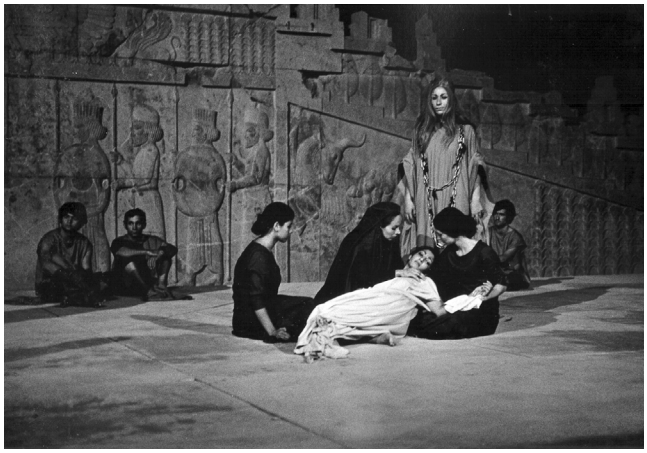


Shah Mobad's brothers escort Vīs to meet the king to fulfill the marriage pact avowed by her mother.
Photo: Maryam Zandi

Vīs and Ramin in prison
Photo: Richard Dixon



Shah Mobad laments his brother Ramin's love for Vīs.
Photo: Richard Dixon

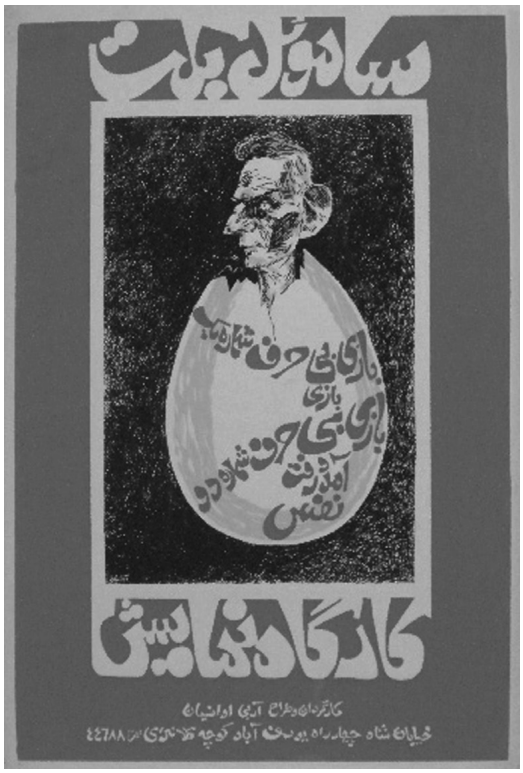


Queen Shahru stands over her ailing daughter, Vīs.

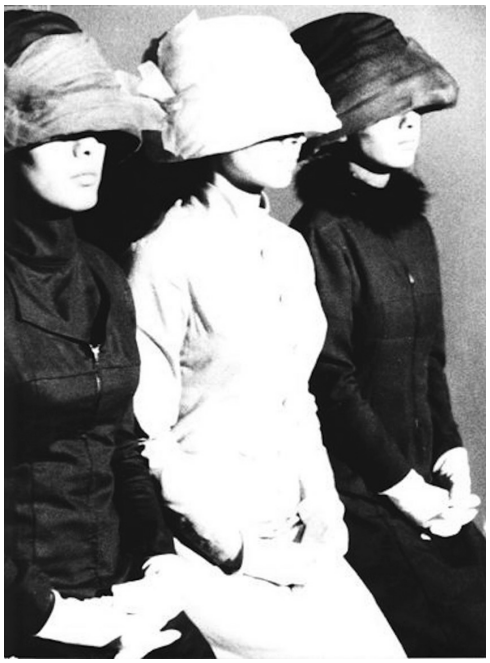
The characters announce they are unable to comply with their historical destiny and end the performance.
Photo: Mehdi Khansari

Ramin remains onstage awaiting Vīs.
All the other characters have left.
Photo: Mehdi Khansari

**1970. Beckett 5 *Act Without Words I* & *Come and Go,* Samuel Beckett**
Theatre Workshop




*Beckett 5*, Theatre Workshop
Poster design: Edward Arshamian

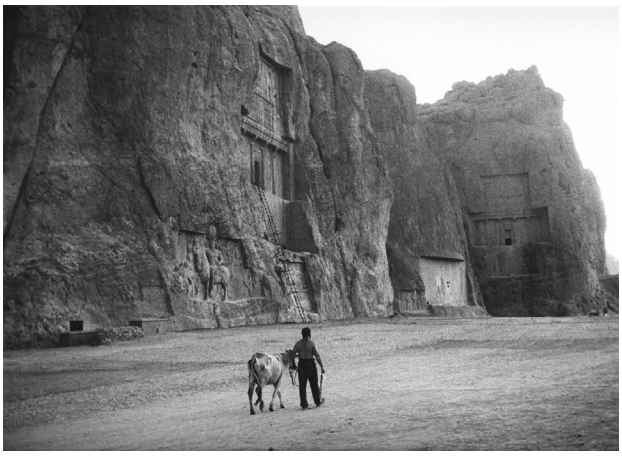


*Come and Go*

*Act Without Words I.* The Man handles mobile that holds objects in balance

**1971. *Orghast, "a work in progress,"* Ted Hughes (text). Directed by Peter Brook in collaboration with Arby Ovanessian, Geoffrey Reeves, and Andrei Serban.**
World premiere, Fifth Shiraz Arts Festival

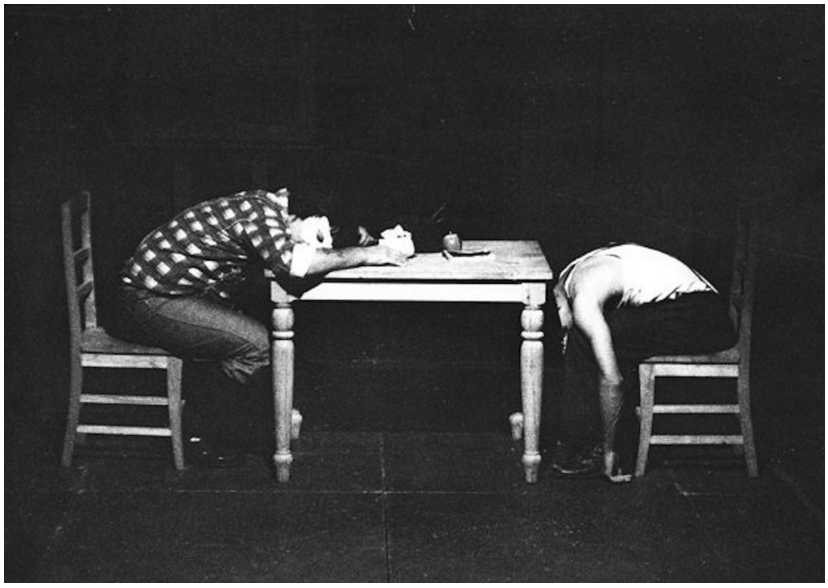
*Orghast I,* Tomb of Artaxerxes II, Persepolis



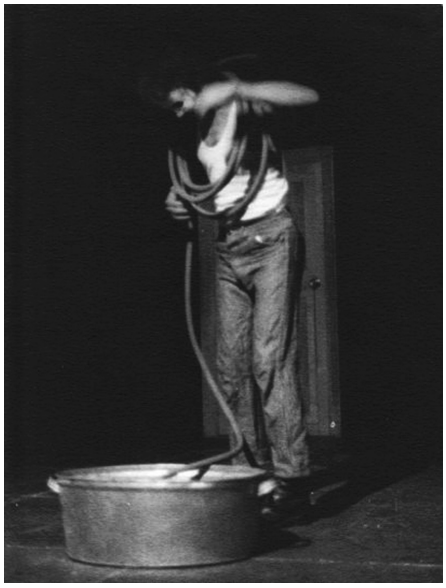
*Orghast II,* Naqsh-e Rostam

**1971. *Self-Accusation,* Peter Handke**
City Players Group, Theatre Workshop

**1971. *My Foot My Tutor,* Peter Handke**
City Players Group, Theatre Workshop

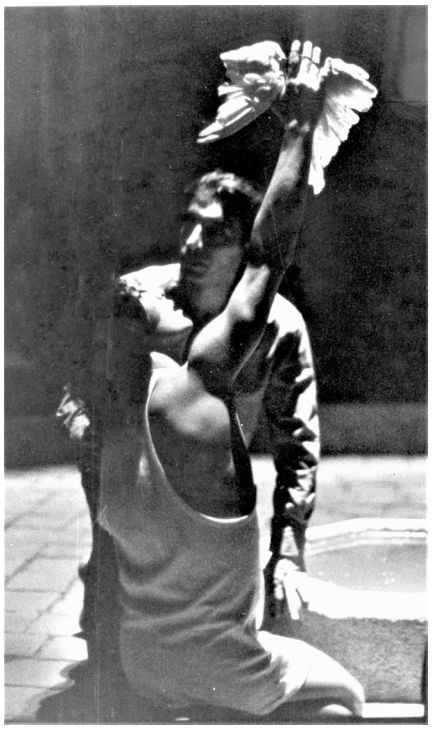


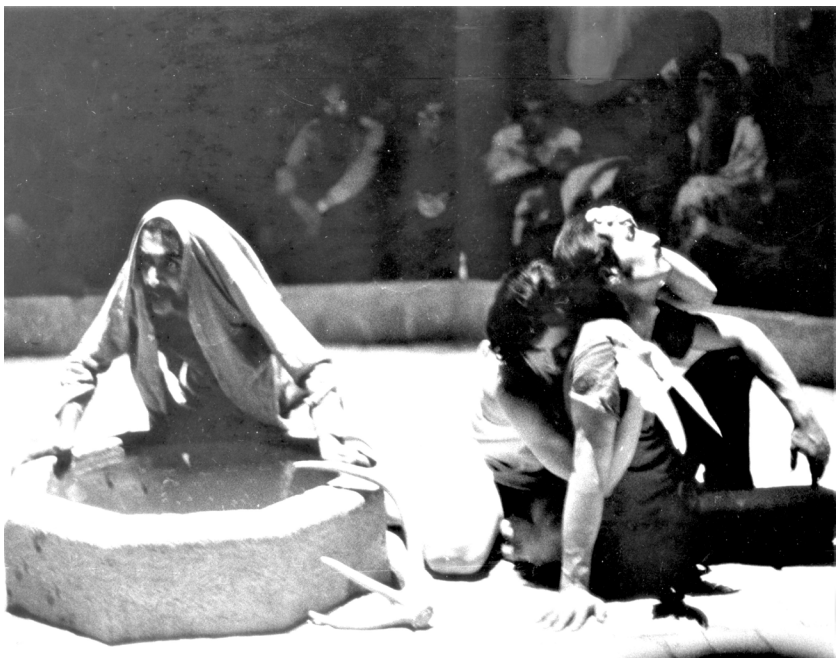
L-R: The warden and the ward
Photos: Henry Yeganian



Ward

**1972. *All at Once*/Nāgahan, Abbas Nalbandian**
**World premiere, Delgosha Pavilion, Sixth Shiraz Arts Festival, at midnight**





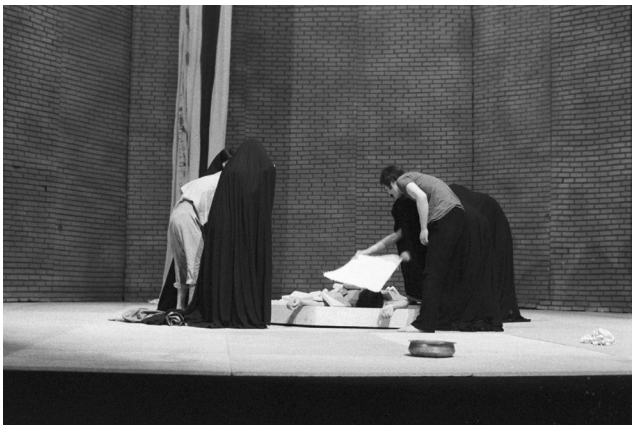
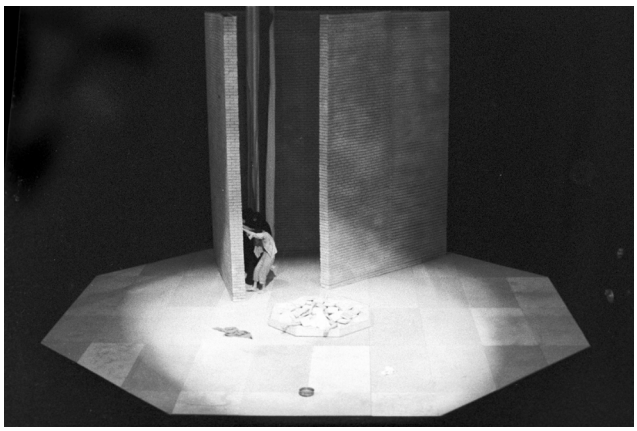
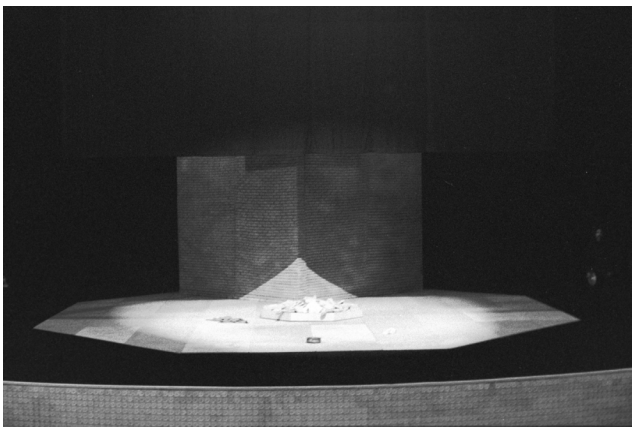
Photos: Kamran Adl

Fereydoun delivering his soliloquy.
Photo: Jamileh Neda'i

Fereydoun murdered and buried in a panic by neighbors.
Photo: Kamran Adl

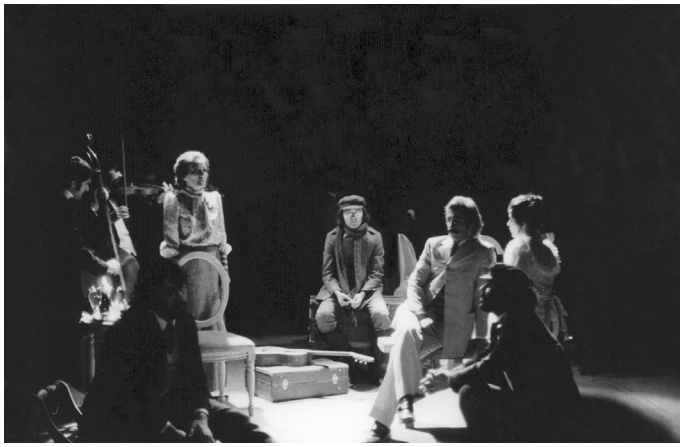
**1972. *All at Once*/Nagahan, Abbas Nalbandian**
City Theatre

Poster design: Arby Ovanessian




Panicked neighbors struggling to cover up their crime.
Photos: Bahman Jalali

**1972. *The Cherry Orchard*, Anton Chekhov**
Bagh-e Ferdows, and experimental runs at the Theatre Workshop

Photos: Edward Balasanian

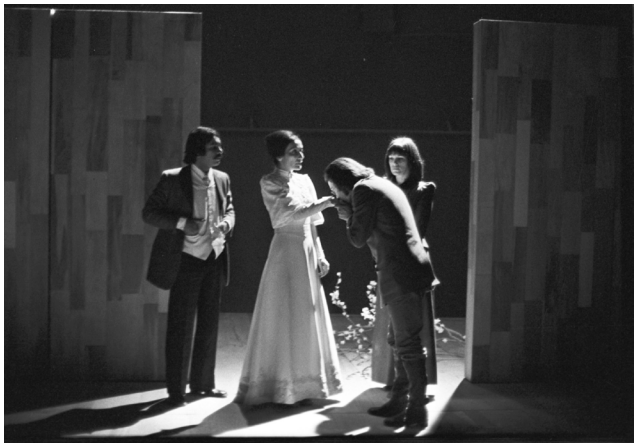


L-R: Lopakhin, Ranevskaya, Trofimov, Yasha, Dunyasha, Yepikhodov

L-R: Trofimov, Ranevskaya, Charlotta behind Lopakhin

**1973. *The Cherry Orchard*, Anton Chekhov**
City Theatre

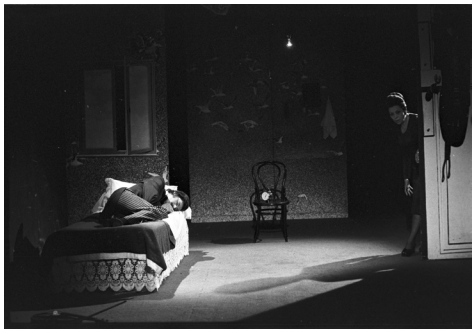
L: Dunyasha and Yepikhodov
Photos: Bahman Jalali



L-R: Gaev, Ranevskaya, Varya, Trofimov

L-R. Firs, Yasha, Ranevskaya, Varya, Lopakhin

**1973. *As We Were*, Arthur Adamov**
Theatre Workshop



A and The Mother
Photos: Bahman Jalali

L-R: The Mother, A, The Aunt

The Aunt (standing)

The Mother, The Aunt, A

**1973. *The Creditors,* August Strindberg**
Theatre Workshop

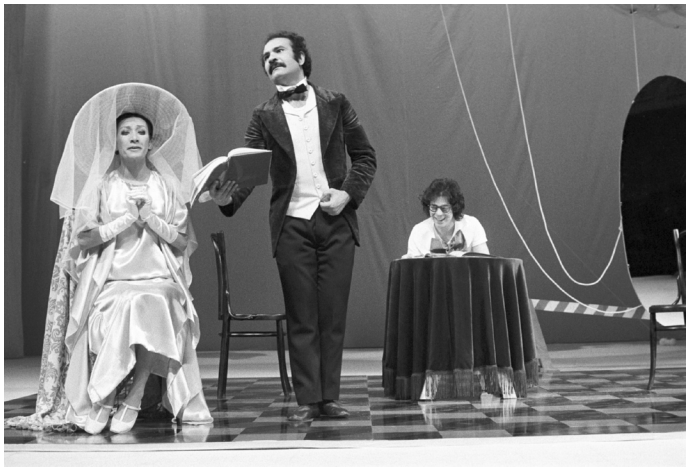
L-R: Adolf and Gustav

Adolf and Tekla

**1974. *Man, Beast and Virtue*. Luigi Pirandello.**
City Theatre

The Angel in flight
Photos: Bahman Jalali

L-R: Belli, Paolino, Gilio

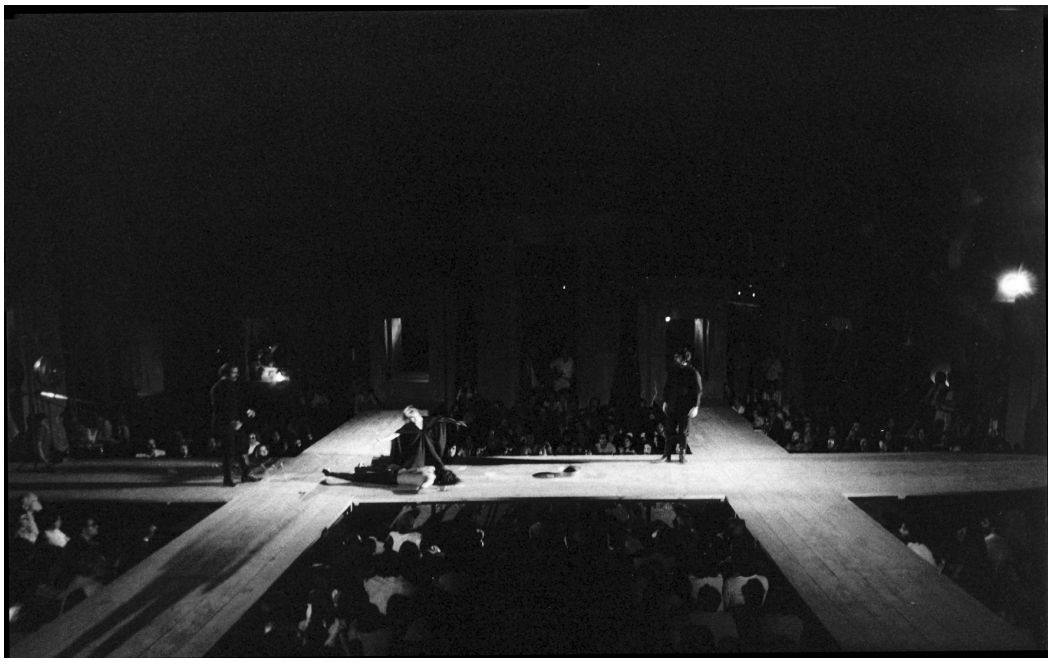


L-R: Mrs. Perella, Paolino, Nono

**1974. City Players Group**

L-R: Seated: Nasrin Rahbari, Jamileh Neda'i, Alireza Mojallal, Arby Ovanessian, Fereydoun Yousefi.
Standing: Susan Taslimi, Parviz Pourhosseini, Mohammad Baqer Ghaffari, Siyavush Tahmouress, Sadreddin Zahed, Fahimeh Rastkar, Ferdows Kaviani.

**1974. *Caligula*, Albert Camus**
Premiere, Tachareh, Persepolis, Eight Shiraz Arts Festival, at nightfall, full moon



Photos: Mehdi Khansari

Caesonia between two Caligulas

Caesonia

L: Sipio and the two Caligulas impersonating a new deity

Veiled bride (C), Cherea (standing), Caligula (L), Helicon.

Caligula (L) and Sipio

Caligula and Caesonia

Caligula and Caesonia

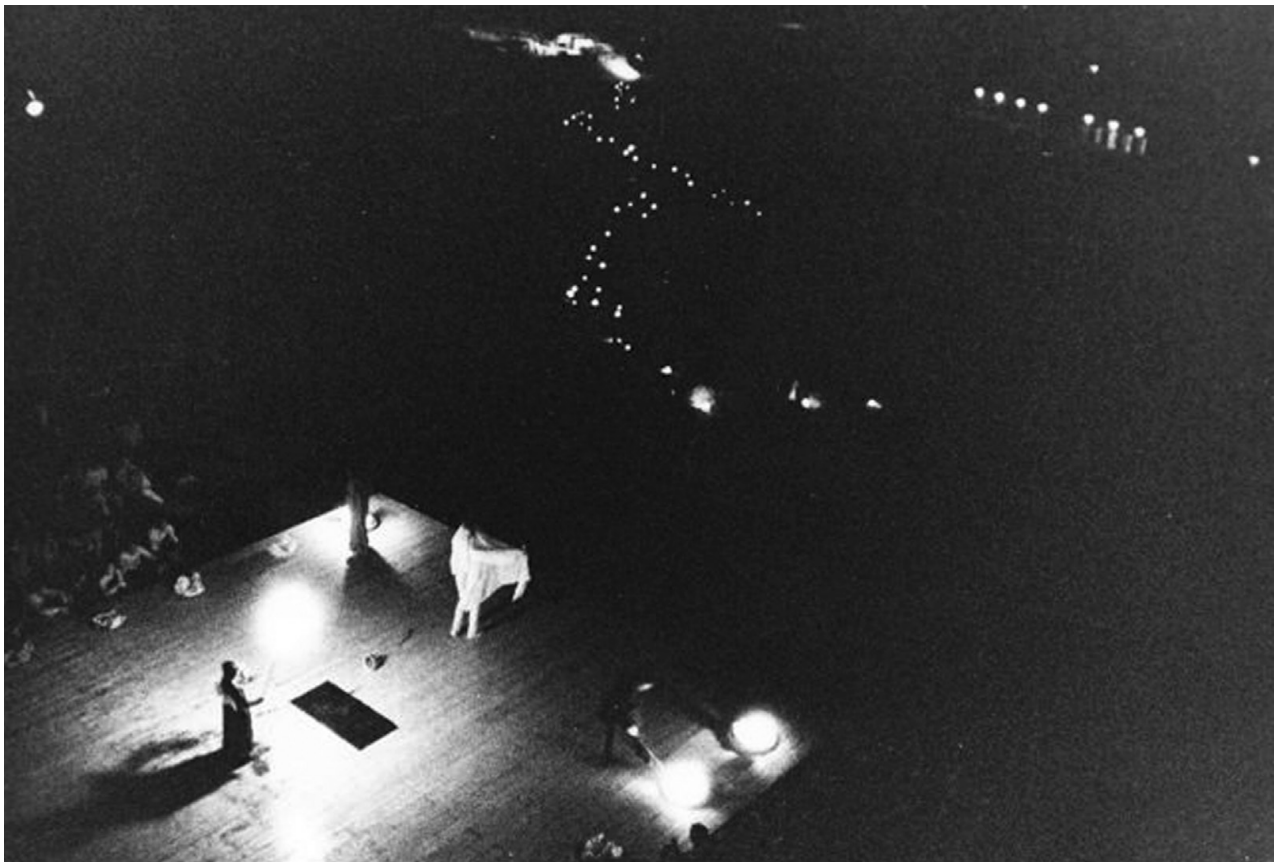
**1974. *Little Eyolf*, Henrik Ibsen**
City Thea

L-R: Alfred Almers, Rita, Eyolf, Asta Almers

Rat Wife seated among the Almers family

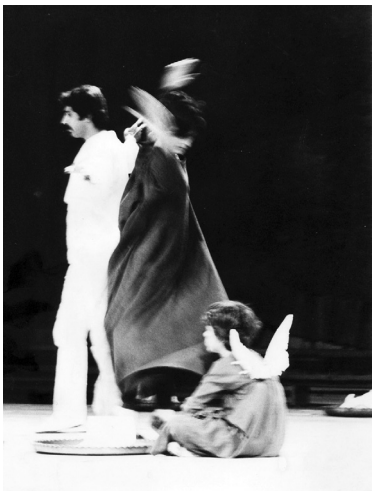
Alfred Almers and Rita after Little Eyolf drowns
Photos: Fo'ad Najafzadeh

**1976. *A Knigth*/Savāri, Mahin Jahanbegloo (Tajadod). Music, Fozieh Majd.**
World Premiere, Tomb of Artaxerxes II, Persepolis, Tenth Shiraz Arts Festival

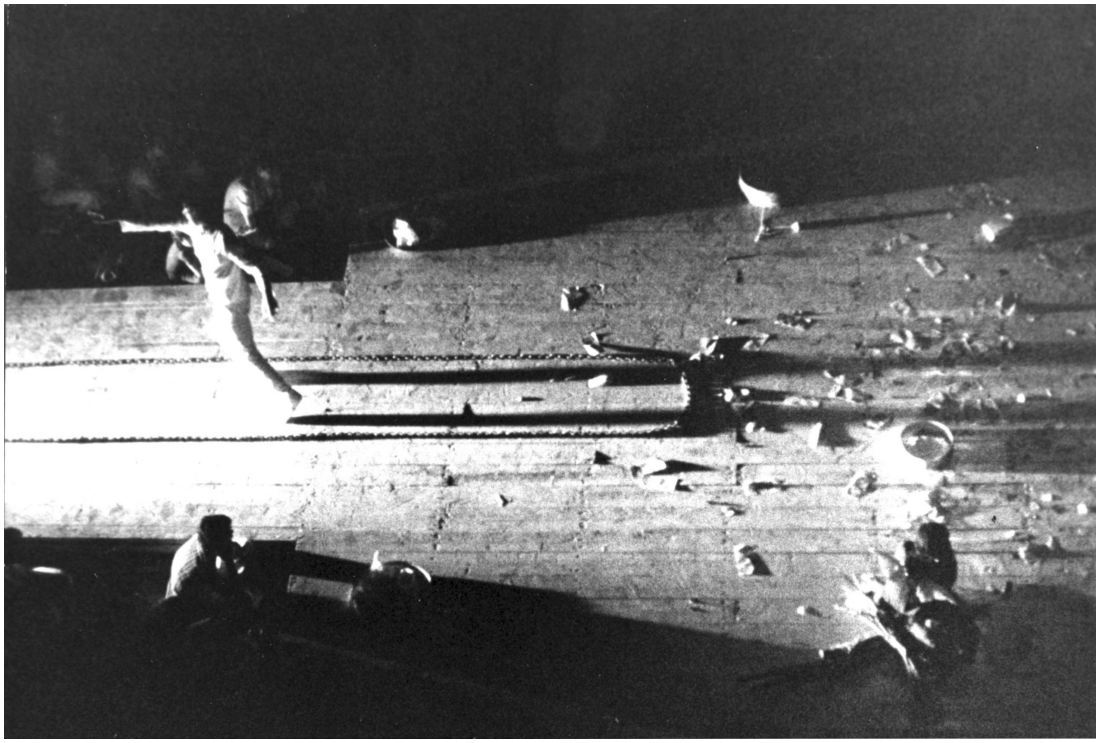


Photos: Fo'ad Najafzadeh

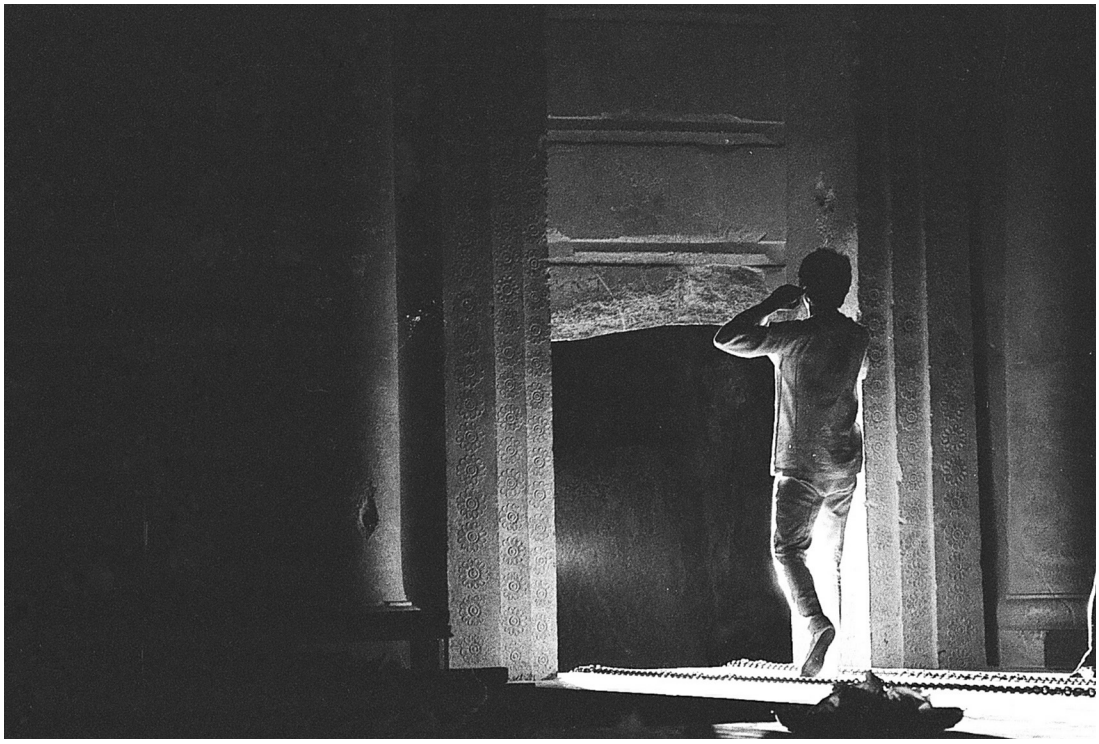
*Casting a spell*



*The Candle and the Butterflies*



*The Death of Phoenix*

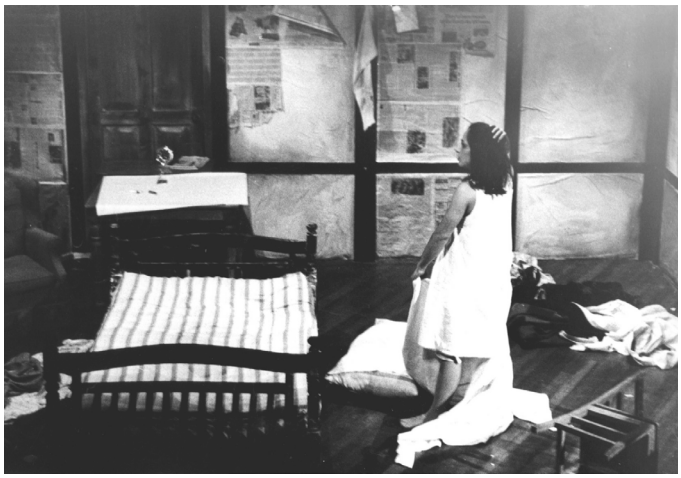


*Light Imprisoned*

**1977. *The Sleeper's Den*, Peter Gill**
Crossroads/*Charsu* Theatre

Mrs. Shannon
Photos: Fo'ad Najafzadeh

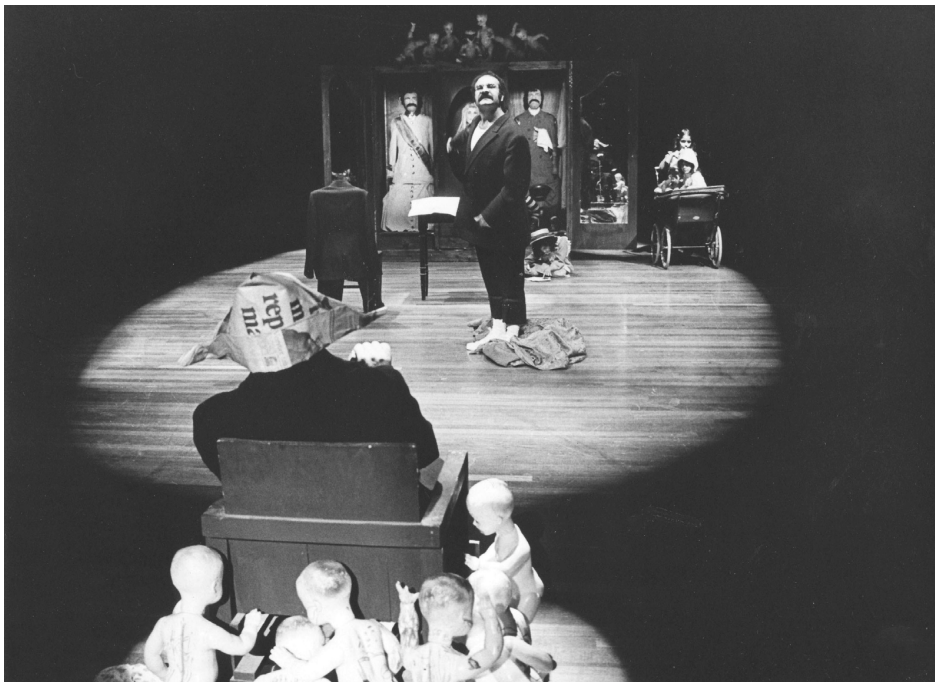
Old Mrs. Shannon lying dead in bed.



Old Mrs. Shannon's corpse and her daughter.

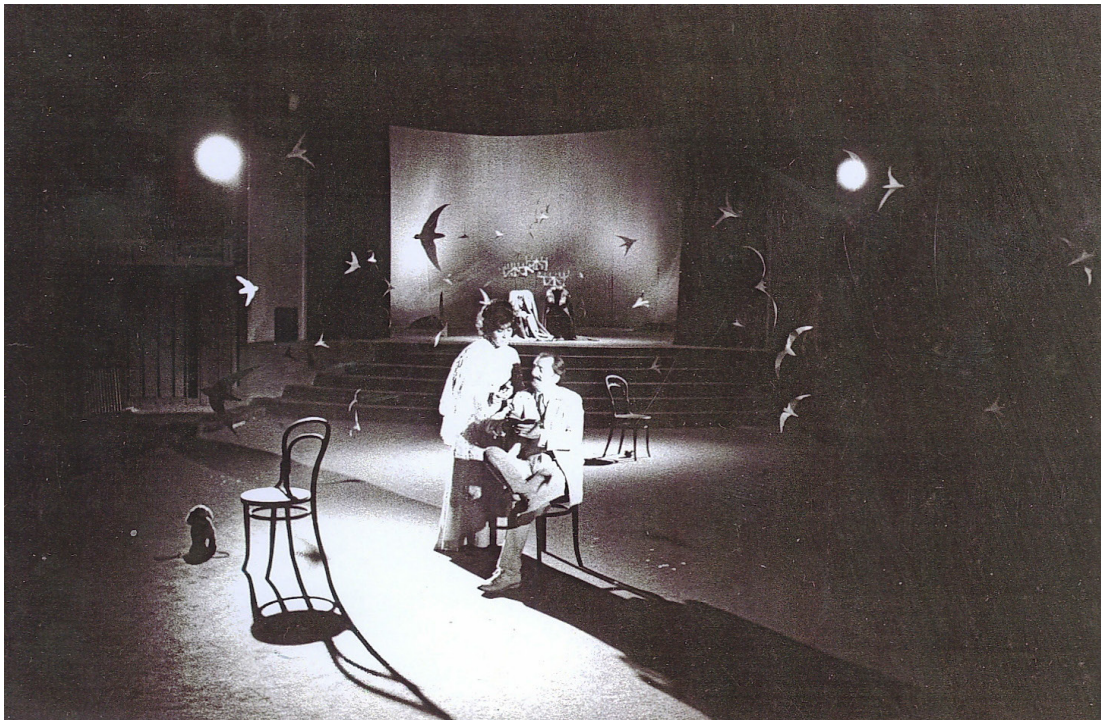
**1977. *Funny Old Man,* Tadeusz** *Różewicz*
Crossroads/Charsu Theatre

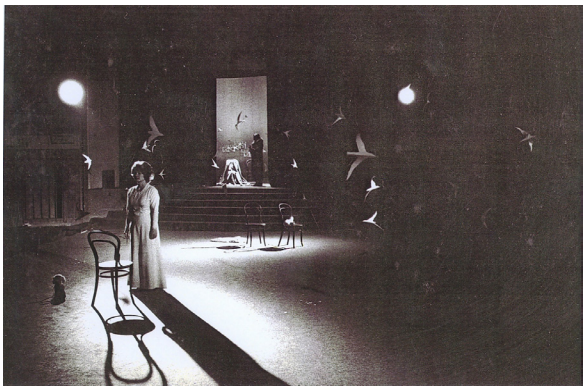
Old Man



Old Man, Madam Judge, dummy Generals, Little Girls
Photos: Fo'ad Najafzadeh

**1978. *The Lady with a Little Dog*. Anton Chekhov**
Ararat Club





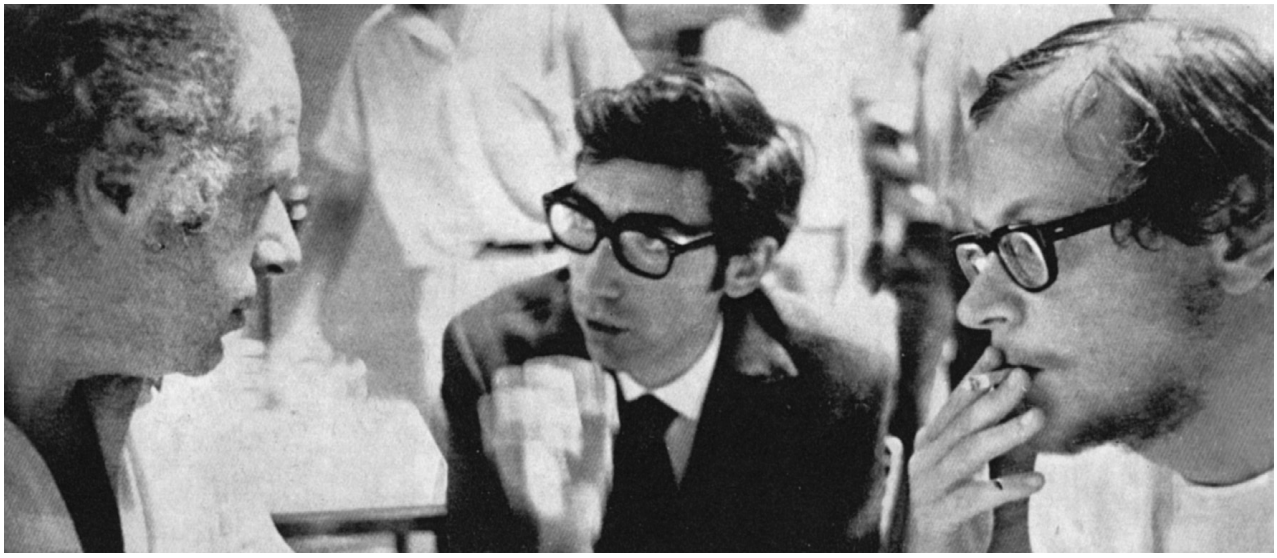
**1979. *La Dame au petit chien*. Anton Chekhov**
Festival d'Automne, Centre Georges Pompidou

Anna Sergeyevna and Dmitri Dmitritch

**1987. *The Marvellous Ones*, Yeghya Kasparian**
World premiere, Cathédral Sainte-Croix de Paris des Arméniens

**1988. *The Chained One*, Levon Shant**
World premiere (complete version), Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière, Paris

# Close up



L-R: Peter Brook, Arby Ovanessian, Jerzy Grotowski, Shiraz Arts Festival, 1970

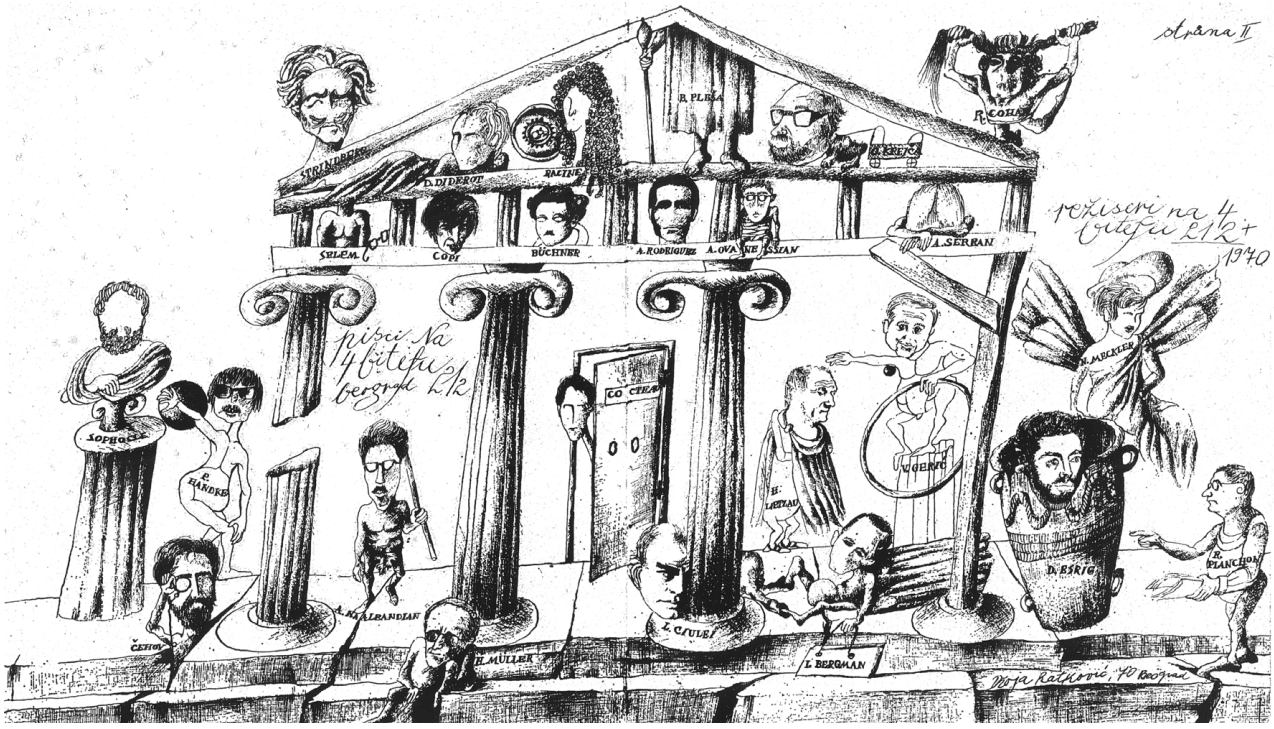



Illustration by Koja Ratković, 1970 BITEF Catalogue, Belgrade. Arby Ovanessian (upper row, 2nd R, wearing glasses); Abbas Nalbandian (lower row, standing with a stick).

# Cinema
# I

# Collaborators, Commentators, Critics

## Amir Taheri (aka Parisa Parsi) — *Critic*

*Keyhan International,* 22 April 1972

***First Tehran International Film Festival*: *Ovanessian's Film Sets Festival Alight*[1]**

A FILM festival that does not provoke controversies is as dull as an old nun. And the First Tehran International Film Festival was a particularly dull nun — until Thursday night.

Then, everything changed suddenly. Polite handshakes and the ritual exchanges of "ta'arof" gave way to fist shaking, hot debate and much lively discussion.

The cause of the sudden change of atmosphere was the showing of Arby Ovanessian's first feature-length film "Cheshmeh" (The Spring) which promises to provide the core of a major debate concerning the role of cinema in general and the young director's work in particular.

As expected, the corps of Tehran film critics is almost completely against Ovanessian. The poor chap is in for yet another series of punches. But, having chosen to go his own way, Ovanessian is unlikely to budge.

Why is "Cheshmeh" provoking such violent passions? To begin with, it is a thoroughly unconventional film that disturbs all the rules and modes of thought concerning cinema rules — modes that have been considered sacrosanct by most critics.

Secondly, it runs counter to almost all present tendencies towards the making of semi-realistic films with a great deal of movement. Finally, it presents a cutting criticism of relations between the Christian and Muslim communities in Iran — relations that have been marked with both fruitful intercourse and mutual lack of understanding.

It is difficult to give any complete outline of the film's "story." This is one of those films that must be seen to be understood even vaguely. The "plot" revolves around a triple love story at the center of which stands the beautiful, but tragically doomed figure of a woman who, in giving love, also brings death and destruction.

The drama unfolds in the midst of a small Armenian village community, probably in West Azarbaijan. This is a society facing the process of disintegration. In it, everyone is dressed in new clothes as if a wedding were to be attended. In fact, it is the gradual death of the community that will be experienced.

The style Ovanessian has chosen in unfolding his "plot" is one taken out of classical Persian literature in which the poet or the storyteller first reveals the end of the story and then embarks upon studying its "how and why." In other words, it is not the creation of suspense that the author is after. He is more interested in an almost anatomical examination of situations.

[1] Original English text reproduced verbatim.

In "Cheshmeh," the same technique is used. But this is not a more use of the flashback technique. The very notion of time is annihilated, and it is through a series of clever collages across the boundaries of time that the drama is pieced together.

It is the probing of the inner depth of the multiple relationships among the four main personages that Ovanessian is really interested in. In this way, he hints at the cosmic collisions that mark almost all human relations.

The village community he introduces is one that has outlived its initial dynamism. It has a perfect set of rules according to which the place of each individual is determined. It is a community of hardy men with lofty principles that no longer apply. It is a society of farmers and artisans who love their work — a society in which workmanship is still greatly admired.

The main "plot," in the hands of a different man, would have provided a basis for creating cinematic tension of the kind associated with bedtime novels treating adultery. Ovanessian, however, is constantly keeping away from easy effects. He does not cheapen such deep human relations by using them for the purpose of making his spectator breathless with suspense.

His cinematic language is a complicated one. His use of allusions is often confusing to those who like an easier time at the cinema. It is true that his film much be accompanied by a "key" for those completely alien to the world he is revealing and to his style as a dramatist.

Ovanessian's use of numerous symbols, on the other hand, is so guarded that his film succeeds in transcending the traditional limits of the imagist's symbolism.

A glass of water passed on top of a man's head shows that the man is doomed — the Persian proverb, "Water passed above his head" comes to mind. The man who takes his shoes and socks off is going to disappear from view — he is going to become a vagabond in an endless desert facing an uncertain fate.

Glasses of wind that are thrown into the spring [*sic.,* stream] symbolize so many men that have passed away. Death comes stealthily and is hardly noticed — like a thief on a dark night. Everything is hinted at and very little use is made of the dialogue for developing any particular situation. The dialogue, on the other hand, serves as a commentary on the broad aspects of life in the community. It is as if a chorus were commenting on the drama that develops through images alone.

This is a beautiful but frightening picture of an entire community. Ovanessian does not take anything lightly; there is little humour in his work. And this, I believe, is the chief weakness of this work as a philosopher using cinema as his medium of expression. The world he creates is as cold as the coldest polar nights. Where human warmth is introduced it is only to emphasize the general coldness of the universe — a chilly universe that makes one sweat under the collar.

Critics are bound to attack Ovanessian for the fact that he has kept his camera constantly static. It is only through his editing that he uses the potentials of cinema for movement. But this is entirely in harmony with the general design of his films. Some sequences appear like surrealistic paintings; others recall group portrayals out of museums.

Ovanessian's cinematic language is a hard, sober, austere and utterly unsentimental one that leaves no room for emotionalism and lyricism of the kind the average cinemagoer is fed upon.

The average cinemagoer is bound to be upset by this film which, rejecting some 70 years of cinematic experiments with movement, is seeking to create dramatic situations through a static camera and what in effect are a series of stills.

Ovanessian makes much use of emphasis and stress. In certain sequences, he allows certain movements and acts — such as drawing water from a well — to last as long as they last in reality. In others he achieves a jump across days, even years, through an imaginative montage.

Some sequences of "Cheshmeh" are visually among the most beautiful and the most complete offered by cinema throughout its history. The sequence at the graveyard and the sequence showing old women embroidering pieces of cloth are among these.

Ovanessian is a strictly disciplined craftsman. His emphasis on precision is truly unique now that everyone is busy rushing films through the studios and to the market. It is therefore not surprising that it took Ovanessian some years to make this film. In other words, he is working in cinema in accordance with traditions created by Iranian craftsmen of the old days, who spent 20 or 30 years creating the exquisite mosaics of the Isfahan mosques.

In "Cheshmeh," every detail is worked out with the precision of a watchmaker. There is nothing extra, nothing that does not contribute in some way to the creation of the genera atmosphere Ovanessian is seeking to create.

In this sense, Ovanessian's work belongs to that school of cinema which is known as the cinema of the author. It is very much a director's film just as the best works of Goddard ad of Bergman.

The background music of the film has been taken from works by Komitas, the great Armenian composer. Lida Berberians has been responsible for the choice and adaptation of the music which does much for deepening the general atmosphere of the film.

Cameraman Nemat Haqiqi has achieved a tour de force never known in Iranian cinema before. Here is a cameraman comparable to the best cinema has known anywhere.

The actors are equally excellent. Arman, as the principled and patriarchal artisan, whose wife betrays him, gives one of the best performances Iranian cinema has ever offered. Jamshid Mashayekhi as the generous farmer who falls in love with the passing image of a well-covered woman — "love is like a woman under a chador . . ." — is really superb. I was less satisfied with Parviz Purhosseini's performance as the adolescent lover who in the end leaves the morbid community that does not accept illicit love. Purhosseini is often theatrical in his gestures although he must be acknowledged as a potentially good actor for cinema.

Mahtaj Nojoumi who plays the woman at the centre of the drama is an excellent actress and makes an impressive debut in the world of cinema.

The dialogue, often poetical, is fascinating on the whole, although it suffers from unevenness. It could be improved by pruning and in certain sequences there is no need for any dialogue at all.

The chief weakness of the film lies in the fact that the dialogue has been dubbed. This is an amazing innovation that, I believe, is peculiar to Iranian cinema. The dubbing has also led to a lack of synchronization in many sequences.

"Cheshmeh" is a masterpiece without a doubt. It is not a film that will sell well or will draw much praise from the critics. But it is a film that has marked a decisive new step in Iranian cinema, serious and responsible.

It was a pity that "Cheshmeh" had no subtitles, as a result of which the members of the festival jury will be in a difficult situation judging Ovanessian's work. But even this is unlikely to prevent those who believe that cinema is in need of new styles from appreciating "Cheshmeh."

## Houshang Hesami — *Critic*

'Film Criticism,' *Keyhan*, 22 April 1972

### *A Film from the Intelligentsia Front*

The first Iranian movie at the Tehran International Film Festival that we had in fact been waiting to see, and which given the filmmaker's background in theatre we already knew to be affiliated with a so-called intellectual front, was indeed an experimental film, though not at the level of a search for a new form of expression but at the level of an "exercise with a camera!"

Despite all its intellectual claims, the film has nothing to say. The audience, that's me, tries throughout the film to find clues along different paths about the characters, their relationships, and the film as a whole, and each time, at the end of the road, asks oneself: *Well, so what?*

The film, contrary to the filmmaker's view who doesn't really know what question he's posed in the movie, has a symbolic premise. At the beginning, a line from John [Revelation] is inscribed on a mud wall next to a black hole, and the audience, at least due to the filmmakers' onsite emphasis, reads this line tens of times. Then it cuts to another scene. A paper dart is hurled from a corner and lands right in the middle of the frame. The camera stays on this piece of paper at least 3 full minutes[2] and you ask yourself why you should have to look at that paper for so long!

The film begins with a slow and tiresome and jaded rhythm. Then some people come and go and forge a nonsensical story. In view of the film's symbolic mold, you start trying as a sort of excuse to look for the cardinal key, no, not to the film, but to this "puzzle". You first tell yourself that these people are "illustrations" of casualties that have come face to face and that each will later meet their configured destiny. The film's deathly atmosphere, with its stillness and frigidity, concocts a special, though adulterated kind of question, namely, "repetition," but in the end you ask yourself: This stillness is erected before what dynamics, meaning that if there is stillness, it manifests itself against vigor and vibrancy, otherwise "stillness" in an abstract form doesn't evince any particular sense.

After that dead-end, you visualize the characters in the story inside a high-walled circle where the filmmaker, with his faltering cinematic language, wants you to infer their interrelationships using a strictly mental method.

These inferred relationships, which finally end with the problem of "repetition," don't unlock any doors, meaning that at the end you ask yourself, *So what*? What does the filmmaker want to say? Does he imagine he's said anything new or that his outlook on life is realistic? If you then presume it may be about "repetition," you note that there's nothing new in that. If you convince yourself that he has depicted life realistically, then you're at a loss as to what to do with the camera's pointless and deadly accentuations of objects and people, because that is not the rhythm of life.

You continue to exert yourself in the hope of finding a key to rescue the filmmaker from the puzzling circle that he's built for himself. You think the film may be about "misunderstanding" and "lack of understanding". But you ask yourself, what "misunderstanding" and what "lack of understanding," and between which characters? If a misunderstanding has ensued about the love of the woman for the Christian youth, that misunderstanding is a creature of the other people's minds, or perhaps of

[2] The actual duration is 48 secs. AO

their own, because they themselves seem hesitant as well. If the main issue is a "lack of understanding," we are not given its premise, and that is how a Gordian knot perpetuates as "The Spring".

The film as a whole is endowed with a poetic sensibility but a sensibility that hasn't "matured". In a few passing moments, such as the scene where a number of Armenian women sit knitting, and with every verse of a poem they recite a cut away reveals something that embodies the sense of the poem; and in the scene where the woman is returning after we have watched her husband lay her in a grave after her suicide and pour dirt on her corpse with his bare hands for ten long minutes (one of the film's ludicrous scenes); and also in the film's final scene where the Jewish youth[3] heads for the desert and wanders off toward the unknown and disappears, we acknowledge the filmmaker's poetic sensibilities but the rest of the time he's merely thinking about "form" and producing "stylish" and "courtly" angles.

Arby Ovanessian is a wholesale "formalist" in cinema just as we have known him to be in theatre. He sacrifices everything to form and doesn't care that this preoccupation with "form" destroys a work's sensibilities.

With this film, where he has also slyly attacked Islamic culture, he has only experimented with "form" and the outcome is a phrenetic, errant, and unwholesome product.

It appears that over the last two years, Ovanessian, has spent the funds provided to him by the National Television to only and exclusively experiment with creating stylish forms with the camera, with little regard for whether anyone understands this film or not.

The film is strictly the product of a mind that suffers from intellectual malaise, of the most bogus kind, to boot, and isolates itself from people and especially from enlightened people so it can remain "superior" and cutting-edge!

In any event, one final point is our complaint to the Festival's selection committee as to why, when they had a film like "The Postman"[4] on hand, they allowed an untenable and childish film like "The Spring" to represent intellectual Iranian cinema.

## Peter Cranston — *Critic*

*Tehran Journal,* 22 April 1972

### *The Spring*[5]

UNDOUBTEDLY the most controversial film of the Festival will be Arby Ovanessian's *The Spring*. At yesterday's press conference the critics almost tore him apart, and it is very unlikely that the film will be well-received by Iranian audiences, either. This is unfortunate, because "Spring" is one of the most beautiful films I've ever seen (visually I mean), and certainly has the most exquisite camerawork I've seen since "Ivan the Terrible" and "La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc."

[3] None of the characters in the film are Jewish. The youth (the Goldsmith's Son who heads out to the desert), The Master, The Master's Wife, and the Vegetable Farmer, are all Christian Armenians.

[4] Dariush Mehrjui, director.

[5] Original English text reproduced verbatim.

It is not, however, as good a film from every point of view as these… far from it. What keeps it from being a masterpiece of that level is the incoherency of the plot. Ovanessian has stated that he was not interested in following a plot, and that he tried to establish the almost abstract quality of the film from the very first scenes.

His basic technique was to lock the camera in place in front of a certain scene, which has been carefully framed for complete harmony and balance. In the accompanying illustration which has unfortunately been cut, it is still possible to see that Ovanessian has probably posed the characters with as much care as if he were going to paint them rather than just film them. Every single frame of the film has been planned with equal precision.

One of the main complaints of the critics was the slowness of the film, which they unimaginatively assumed to "symbolize" the "stagnation" of the society Arby was depicting. In fact, as he himself said, "In my life I can look at a piece of paper a child has thrown on the ground for minutes at a time." What he has tried to do, and what Ray, for examples does so well, is to make the viewer really look at a scene, instead of just passively accepting it as one does in the usual speedy Hollywood film. He asks us to contemplate the image, almost to meditate on it, to become it.

Some of these images become, by this method, so deeply moving as to stop the rhythm of the heart. Sunlight through leaves, or a samovar sitting in a sun-lit window: these pictures will remain with me. Arby's feeling for architecture is unsurpassed, his depiction of people's faces, as in the tea-house scene, has all the suggestive richness of an old photography from Qajar times, or a childhood memory which suddenly returns with complete clarity.

*The Spring,* according to Arby, is an allegory; the subjects are time and memory, nature and sin. Some of his images of wrong-doing and death are very strong, as are his allegories of re-birth and childhood. "Spring" is a truly remarkable first film, and if in his next movie Ovanessian can make the entire work as crystal clear as the camerawork in this one, he will take his place among the really important directors of the world. Film festivals are supposed to discover new talent. I hope the world discovers Arby, since he seems destined to make a lot of enemies in his own country.

## Ramin Jahanbegloo — *Professor of philosophy and political science, writer*[6]

Tehran, summer 2003

**Arby Ovanessian's films include a large number of sequence shots and long takes. The longer the duration of a shot, the more difficult it is to cut, and that leaves a distinct impression on the viewer. What are your thoughts about this structure, which Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu and other filmmakers have also experimented with?**

In my view, Ovanessian's cinema is unique and essentially spiritual. As with Andrei Tarkovsky and Sergei Parajanov, the use of sequence shots stems from this distinct transcendental vision that Arby has of the time-image. Whether in theatre or in film, he wants to present his own time-image to the viewer in order to create its own unique spirituality in that structure and space. For example, in the first famous sequence shot in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh — where after

[6] Unless otherwise noted, all interviews in this section were conducted by the author. Tr

the fall of the paper dart the camera stays on it for 48 seconds — many have been critical of that but in my opinion, he has done the right thing. Or in *Lebbæus/Thaddæus,* we see a shot of the church interior whose long duration makes one wonder about it. This is the exact opposite of the news-image, that is, the very fast-moving imagery that we have become used to in the media, as in television, the Internet, etc. This kind of cinema stays on the images longer to let the viewer reflect on them and on the interrelation between their components.

**Does that mean that given the long take, viewers effectively do their own cutting within a shot?**

To some extent, yes, but it's more about how you penetrate that space.

**By space you mean the metatextual world that the filmmaker has in mind?**

I call it the invisible world. Given that he follows a style that is similar to filmmakers like Tarkovsky, Bresson, Parajanov, and even Carl Dreyer, he's after the invisible world, meaning he is looking for a truth behind reality.

**The same phenomenon applies to the use of space. In his classification of space, Noël Burch identifies two kinds, one is the space we see onscreen, and the other a space that we do not see; I mean the space outside the frame. In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, much attention has been paid to the space outside the frame.**

There are spaces outside the frame in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, while spaces within the frame also receive a lot of attention, like the scene of the Goldsmith's Son laying down on his lover's grave who's buried in the pool in the house. In effect, the viewer feels his closeness to his lost love.

The dialogues have been used very thoughtfully. In his next film, *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life*, which derives from theatre, you hear the full flow of the characters' conversations, plus voice over. These dialogues and phrases are full of meaning and tie into that same invisible world.

**The dialogues also show us the dichotomy between the characters, like the scene of the conversation between The Master Spring Builder and the Vegetable Farmer where we get to know their dichotomy and inner worlds.**

One of my favorite scenes is the death of The Master where the pendulum stops — that is, time stops passing and you in effect enter a different time. He has composed his timeline in such a way that when the pendulum stops, we become aware of the presence of death. Or, for instance, where The Master's friends are sitting by the stream and toss their cups into the water; with that move, the stream's current carries us along with the current of life. All these are channels that coast us toward that same invisible world.

**The camera movement and the actors' movements in the frame are minimal. *The Spring*/**

**Cheshmeh also intimates an internal movement.**

Yes, it's more internal than external. He will never make a film that only involves external movements, because that is not the pulse of his outlook on life. The other reason is his intense belief in Armenian spirituality. Arby uses symbolism in his films, like Parajanov, and from his perspective, this symbolism is a discovery of mysteries — how do we experience diverse objects beyond the reality that we witness every day, and what truths lie behind them that one has to capture.

**He considers the story in his film to be only a means and doesn't provide any justification and explanation of the scenes, or the questions that the shots raise in our minds.**

Naturally, cinema for him is a means, because the more important question for him is the spiritual world.

**What kind of storytelling in film history do you think *The Spring*/Cheshmeh's storytelling derives from?**

As Pasolini says, cinema becomes a language.[7] *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is based on a love triangle between three men and a woman but with *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, Ovanessian offers a new perception of reality. Had the screenplay been handed to a Hollywood director, s/he would have made it with actors using the common methods and the standard pace. But he has added his own interpretation, exegesis, and perception of reality to the story, which thus brings us close to Pasolini's comments on language and poetry.

**A word is meaningful in a sentence; this parallels Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage — that a shot is meaningless by itself. Does that concept apply to the editing in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh?**

The montage in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is creative. In effect, the director connects the sequence shots such that he can create a particular sense out of them, a metaphysical sense.

**What is that metaphysical sense?**

A search for a sort of invisible world, meaning its object is not only the reality that transpires.

**Is that the question on the filmmaker's mind about the world of existence?**

Exactly, and the filmmaker has to turn it into a cinematic grammar for the audience.

**And keep all cinematic variables at his disposal in his language.**

[7] Pier Paolo Pasolini read his essay *The Language of Poetry* at the Pesaro Film Meeting (1965), which was published in the October issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* the same year. An English translation is available in *Movies and Methods*, Bill Nichols, ed. University of California, 1976, vol. 1: 542-558.

Yes, using your cinematic language with a different outlook you can transform that story into something else otherwise this grammar and this special language will not come to be.

**Please tell us about the feature film he made in France, and its structure.**

After he left Iran for France, he worked on theatre for a while. His feature film, *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life,* is based on one of his theatre productions.[8] His next film is a documentary featuring the collection of his interviews with Rouben Mamoulian and has not yet been edited. After the death of Greta Garbo and Mamoulian himself, French TV wanted to broadcast a few excerpts, but he declined as he believes his images become meaningful as a collection. Arby is looking for meaning in cinema and his cinema should be viewed through that lens.

People like Arby Ovanessian put in a lot of effort to throw light on theatre and cinema for Iranians. What was important in his work is that he also taught theatre and cinema; he introduced new approaches to cinema and theatre in his works.

## Houshang Azadivar — *Filmmaker, poet, translator*

Tehran, summer 2007

**Has *The Spring*/Cheshmeh succeeded in rendering the subject it wants to express or not?**

In Iranian cinema, few have ever searched for a cinematic language and forms of expression that stems from our own culture. Arby searches for a new language in all his works. In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, we encounter an Armenian-Iranian culture. The success of such works shouldn't be viewed through the lens of audience reception. This film has been very successful, because it presents a new film language.

**Most independent movies before the Islamic Revolution had small audiences. In some of those movies we come across new experiments in language. Would you say *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is an interest in experimenting with a novel form of film language?**

Yes. Interest in experimenting with language is evident in his works. Not only *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, but there's an alternative communication method in his theatre productions; plus, there's aesthetics and ritual behavior. He disrupts the foundation of the story to guide the audience to a kind of meditation and take them beyond the sphere of mundane habits. Pauses and silences are part of the drama of this movie. The director is not into storytelling; the audience has to simply fall into the rhythm and space that's built into the film.

I believe none of the alternative movies that were made before *The Spring*/Cheshmeh faced as much hostility. Critics were faced with a film they were incapable of judging. Basically, they felt offended that they didn't understand the film.

[8] For more information see CINEMA II, *A Conversation with Arby Ovanessian.*

**Please elaborate on the nature of those critics' opinions and opposition.**

Before the Revolution, the Iranian public's knowledge of films made in the West was limited to narrative cinema. If our critics had also seen alternative Western films in Iran, they would have expressed the same opinions.

**Why do you consider *The Spring*/Cheshmeh an alternative film?**

Because of its cuts, its shots, the duration of the shots and the relationships among the shots, the silences, the framing, reaching into the depths of events, and altogether its world. *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is not entertaining; it's a cinematic motion. It connects to the audience like music.

**What is the standout feature of its editing?**

It's not editing, but montage, like in the works of Eisenstein. The concept of montage in cinema serves a new vision here and turns into a language. When we see a lengthy take of a paper dart and then a different image follows it in a montage, we enter another world on the contact between these two images. In such films, one has to let go of oneself and surrender to the film; the same way one surrenders to music. In my view, the critique of these kinds of films should also be different.

**In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, we are looking at poetic cinema.**

Yes. Poetry has a distinct language and creates a certain world; over and above a linear trajectory, it reaches for a broader language in regards dimensions and other concepts. In poetry, one is after the meanings that reside behind a word. In poetic cinema, one should likewise be able to see behind the images, which generates a multidimensional facet. If we look at it through that lens, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is like a poem.

***Also, compactness in the choice of shots and the type of editing can also contribute to this poetic air.***

Well, the more compact the poem, the purer.

**So, like Eisenstein's dialectical montage where the role of a shot is like a word in a sentence, and by placing these words side-by-side, a meaning or meanings emerge.**

Yes, that's why I differentiated between editing and montage just now. In linear editing, the shots are linked in a cause-and-effect relationship to convey a specific meaning, but montage goes farther; in addition to conveying meaning, it also creates meaning.

**The film's long takes allow the viewer to fall into its spirit. In my view, he's an experimental filmmaker, for he's innovating a form and has arranged his chosen subject based on a rhythm that's in step with his inner motivations. What are the roots of his cinematic structure?**

We can't call his cinema experimental. His works are rooted in ritual; in my view, he's also after ritual in cinema. I believe the images in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh are not necessarily cause and effect-based and that we're faced with a different domain; maybe that's why we don't dare go along with it.

**In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, we also find different definitions of space and time; in what way do the static shots help the audience? Why is the image sustained after the characters exit the frame, and why are their movements on view the full time it takes them to exit?**

Time and space can obey their own laws in an artistic work. You're referring to time that can be measured by a watch. That has nothing to do with artistic or philosophical time. This film doesn't have a dramatic structure in the usual sense at all. It might be more accurate to call it a tragic structure, as the subject of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is tragic, not dramatic. Dramatic time is affiliated with earthly logic and is scientific, while a tragic structure transcends this visible world. Tragic time is an eternal time that is not due to a logical process of cause and effect. When the character exits the frame and the empty image is sustained, a certain sense of anticipation and reflection sets in the audience. In this film, these types of shots have a static appearance but inside, they are alive and pulsating. The previous shot does not induce the subject in the next shot and they are not direct outcomes of each other, rather, each has its own power of expression and they are related in a different time, meaning in an eternal time.

## Mahtaj Nojoumi — Lead actress, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh

Tehran, 2007

**Please talk about how Ovanessian directed actors in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, and the differences with the way he worked in theatre.**

What he wanted in film had radical differences with theatre. Unlike his theatre productions where the actors used various acting techniques and methods to present their character, what he wanted from us in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh was 'don't act at all, just be present'. We had to be present without any acting techniques. He wanted to instill a sort of inner discipline in all the actors, a sort of communal quest, like ritual ceremonies.

**What sort of guidance did he offer you?**

He sometimes effected harmony and unity with his comments, as each actor had a different background. Despite those differences, the acting style in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh reached perfect unity at the end. Just like what happened with the various locations for creating single units. Despite scattered locations, perfect harmony was achieved in the film. Of course, the film doesn't seem tied to a particular time and place but carries and drives a general concept in a general space. That approach and harmony applied to the acting as well.

*— In an early sequence, as The Master's Wife walks down a path a young girl enters the shot from the opposite direction and passes her by. What is the meaning of that scene, do you think?*

If the young girl weren't in the shot, the shot would be neutralized and meaningless. I think that with a young girl passing by dancing like a butterfly, two emotional zones were created. One, the woman with a past grief returning from her son's graveside — which had become a Sunday ritual for her — and the other, a young girl who's at the beginning of her life. I take the two passing each other in the shot to simultaneously mean a contrast and a binary idea of existence, beginning and end, or birth and death, in a way the same thing that we face throughout the film. That initial scene without dialogue carries the full weight of those concepts.

I should also like to point out something about the role of numbers like forty or seven in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, that each point to and serve as a ritual or mysteries beyond themselves.

**On close examination, each of the characters in the film reveals unique factors, but The Master's Wife has a multifaceted character and embodies multiple meanings.**

Given the prevailing tenets of the age and his kinds of feelings about his wife's suicide, The Master buries her himself outside the norms of the church, in a way free of the need for customary church ceremonies. He looks like a mystical person. In my view, The Master's Wife personifies a woman who possesses different traits that can co-exist in a woman: from others' point of view, she personifies a lover, a mother and also a prostitute. These diverse traits come to light in her encounters with different people and are put on display. In the scene where she's inside the house with the Goldsmith's Son, other than being a lover, she plays a mother's role as well. The woman places the man's hat on his head and prepares the lover to take his leave from the beloved. It's natural that the secret relationship between the two in a society where there are two different religious traditions cannot remain protected, so, it ends in tragedy. A woman is a mother, the source of life, and a lover at the same time, is life and its destroyer.

**The relation of the location to the character of The Master's Wife also conveys that; she is seen in the cemetery and in the garden and also by the spring, which is a symbol of life and kinship; there is a connection between the location and the characters in the film.**

Yes. When the spring dries up and she is unable to draw water, she is shocked. In the drying up of the spring, she sees her sin and envisions her fate in death, and perhaps unconsciously accepts death.

**The actors used simple gestures in their performance; for instance, when the Vegetable Farmer visits The Master's house and briefly glances at The Master's Wife, that gesture bears the weight of the tragic situation. To what extent were these simple gestures discussed and what sort of guidance did the director offer?**

What he valued was the simplicity of behavior. In a scene after the woman's burial, the Vegetable Farmer's brother, believing the Goldsmith's Son to be his brother's murderer, wants to stab him to death. The knife attack that was then common in popular movies, the action was totally different here. Here, the behavior wasn't like bas-reliefs that are etched in stone and with the typical rage and hullabaloo.

I can tell you Arby was so meticulous in setting up his shots that he spent a long time on the smallest details and their placement, even a mere pair of shoes, until he was satisfied, let alone his attention and sensitivity toward the actors' performance!

**In what way does the dialogue between The Master's Wife and the Goldsmith's Son in the derelict house help build the emotional state of that sequence?**

It doesn't follow the usual form of dialogues and repetitive and conventional scenes in cinema; it's more like a poem, parts of which are recited in different shots. Each image represents a particular station; the links between these seven images, together with the brief exchanges, complete the sense; I believe they speak of a process; they transcend. In effect, they indicate the culmination of the separation and of reaching a unity.

**A great deal of attention is also paid to stillness and silence in the film.**

There's very little dialogue in the film. The Goldsmith's Son, the lover, becomes very troubled and after wandering about, reaches a well. On the roof of a hut, a girl is singing a song. He turns around and looks toward the sound. Given his inner turmoil and lost love, hearing the sound arouses an intense turmoil in him. These moments have broad dimensions and are beautiful.

In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, he tried to polish all that was rough. The film began with the music of Komitas and a long rest on the paper dart that is thrown by the boy, which elicited protests by some who were used to the fast pace of commercial movies of those days. In a way, this was an invitation to the audience to silence and stillness. It was a kind of prelude to convey the point to the audience to forget their usual expectations and familiar habits and understand the different tune of the work from that very moment.

## Lida Berberians — *Pianist, music instructor, art critic*

Tehran, summer 2007

### *Music in The Spring*/Cheshmeh

As with Arby Ovanessian's other works, death casts a shadow in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh. The shadow appears with the very first shot along with a verse from the New Testament (John's Revelation 9.6): *And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them*. A dark crevice on the wall of earthen-plastered house, which at first sight looks like an empty grave, is seen uninterruptedly under the film's opening credits.

The story revolves around four characters, each one of whom is caught in the twists and turns of unrequited love. Using four instruments for the theme music of such an atmosphere seemed appropriate, but the director wanted to use Komitas for voice and piano — not the vocal parts, only the accompaniment, that is, the piano arrangements. The director assigned the task of working on this scheme and performing the selected pieces to me. A few important points about that are noted below:

Komitas' piano accompaniments are characterized by simplicity and depth of feeling. Despite their extraordinary variety, only two particular types were used for the film. The first type, which has long notes, is slow, and lacks melody, was selected for the title sequence and the shot of the pool's static water. The second type is like Bach's Preludes, but simpler, with continually recurring themes and only slight variations.

These types of works have two advantages: First, they reveal the music's rhythmic movements at the outset; and second, by continually recurring for a long time, they induce a trance-like state in the listener. Given that the film has a poetic fabric, the music was in effect selected to correlate with that fabric. Just as the piano parts correlate with the poetry and the lyrics of the songs and they all complement each other in Komitas' music, in the film, too, the image, the piano music, instrument (oboe) and song complement each other.

A number of sequences where the selected music was used are briefly described below.

- In the sequence where The Master's Wife goes to meet her lover (the Goldsmith's Son) in secret, the poem symbolically relates a conversation between two birds that lament the winter cold as they impatiently await the arrival of spring. The original composition by Komitas begins with no rhythm but becomes lively from the tenth bar on, like Bach's Preludes, and finds a beautiful visual harmony in the scene with the little girl's playful skipping and the steady steps of The Master's Wife.

  The music stops mid-play at the same time as the spring water — which The Master's Wife wants to drink — is turned off, which suggests the absence of any relationship between the Vegetable Farmer and The Master's Wife.

- For another sequence in the film where seven elderly, black-clad women tell stories of those who have passed as they knit, a lively music has been used in a prelude-like form.

- In the shot where the camera pans up a tree trunk from below, a male vocalist recites an Armenian song called *Hov Arek*/Cast a Shade.[9] This shot is like an interlude and scales down the strain of the film to some extent, though it should be noted that the lyrics reflect the burning grief of a man who pleads with mountain shades and rain showers and springs to allay his inner pain. In the film, the song, which is sung in Armenian, goes as follows:

  *Mountains, dear mountains, cast a shade*
  *Soothe my pain.*
  *The mountains don't cast a shade*
  *The mountains don't cast a shade*
  *They don't soothe my pain*
  *They don't soothe my pain.*
  *Clouds, clouds, blow a breeze*
  *Shower rains make a sea*
  *Take the life*[10] *of the wicked man*
  *Under black earth lay it down*!

[9] I had chosen this song by Komitas for the film's ritual scene and recorded it with Archpriest Khoren Berberian of the Armenian Apostolic Church in London performing a cappella. The song's piano part, which I used for the film's opening title sequence, was performed by Miss Berberians and recorded in Tehran. AO

[10] In Armenian, the term for "sun" translated here as "life" is synonymous with life/lifetime. Tr

- In the sequence where The Master's Wife and her lover meet, the piano accompaniment is derived from the romantic song, *You're Like a Sycamore Tree*. The music plays on as they walk through a dark passage into a garden teeming with sycamore trees. The recurring, prelude-like piano music with its special pathos accords with the emotions of The Master's Wife and the Goldsmith's Son and their ritualistic expressions of love inside the old house of a woman who has gone on pilgrimage and never come back. Here are the lyrics:

  *You're like a sycamore tree, don't droop*
  *Love, love, love*
  *Don't walk away from my door*
  *Hey hey, hey hey, hey love,*
  *Hey hey, hey hey, hey*
  *My beloved, for God's sake*
  *Love, love, love*
  *You're far away from me, don't grow aloof*
  *Love, love, love*
  *Hey hey, hey hey, hey*

- The melody *Garoon*/Spring was selected for the sequence where six friends of the Master Spring Builder sit around a spread like Jesus and the Apostles at the Last Supper and drink wine in memoriam to their lost friend. The melody was composed by Komitas to express the Armenian people's collective mourning:

  *Nobody is waiting for you*
  *You come in vain, Spring*
  *Nobody is here to eulogize you*
  *You come in vain, Spring*
  *The world is engulfed in darkness*
  *Meadow and mountain are covered in blood*
  *We are wholly wretched this year*
  *Wherefore are you coming, Spring?*
  *If the nightingale sings*
  *Nobody is here to rejoice*
  *You come in vain, Spring*

  It should be noted that in the sequence of the wine-drinking ceremony, following a melody with sustained eighth notes (whole tone or semitone), the music has a melancholic mood that intensifies as it progresses. The dirge reaches a climax when the melodic phrase recurs in a group of six chromatic eighth notes that sound like sobbing and wailing and is performed in the film with two woodwinds, on the screen, a *sorna,* and on the audio track, an oboe.[11]

  The story of the film relates to 19th century Armenia, a period where wind instruments like the *duduk* were used in funeral ceremonies; the tradition is more or less intact in Armenia to date while they also use orchestral instruments such as the oboe and the

[11] The original composition was performed by a four-part choir, which I used at the beginning of *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus.* The song was arranged for oboe by Miss Berberians for *The Spring*/Cheshmeh. AO

clarinet.

- In another enigmatic sequence of the film, as the young man follows the voice of a girl who is singing — she is not visible at first — and enters the tree-filled backyard of a hut, the song, known as *Andouni*/Homeless, echoes his emotional state:

  *My heart is like a house in ruins*
  *Timbres broken, columns fallen*
  *There wild birds will make their nest.*

  Just as the Goldsmith's Son crosses the hut's threshold and calls out to the singer with two words, "ma'am" and "sister," the girl's voice cuts off. The young man is there to draw water from a deep well; he lowers a pail into the well and pulls it up with great effort. But before bringing it to his lips, he senses the presence of the proprietor and, despite his thirst, reluctantly refrains from drinking.

- In the ritual scenes of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, to evince a Christian-Armenian milieu, church bells and liturgical hymns were used, which along with Komitas' music gives more depth to the film's poetic and elegiac structure.

### Varooj Soorenian — *Writer, translator, critic*

Tehran, summer 2007

**What do you think of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh?**

It's a very deep film, cold atmosphere, and its emotional strain is spare. The director has intentionally withheld emotions from the film, which to some extent flows in a metaphysical world. In a work of art, I like to also connect with its emotional strains. For instance, in the case of the woman's suicide, the viewer feels that she had to commit suicide and no other option was available to her. As a result, one doesn't empathize with her. It's as if the fate of all the characters in the film has been preordained, like in Greek tragedies.

*The Spring*/Cheshmeh was a novel film that in the cacophony of 'FilmFarsi'[12] in those days opened a new path for young film directors.

**On seeing 'free adaptation' in the opening credits, we know not to expect the story to unfold in a familiar way.**

Yes, the story had changed. The author wrote the novel during the Soviet era and was obliged to have it look realistic, while Arby cast it in a somewhat mystical vein free of sentimentality. For instance, even when The Master faces the corpse of his wife, his face betrays no emotion. The relationships between people are internal rather than external.

[12] Term coined by film critic Houshang Kavousi in the 1950s to describe Iranian commercial films prior to the emergence of New Wave cinema in Iran in the early 1970s.

**In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, the choice of acting style, and secondly, the choice of shots and their editing has an unconventional goal. For instance, the director draws the viewer's attention to the suicide with a few quick cuts, before we have time to identify with the character as in classic movies. Even the woman's death is devoid of the kind of initial impact that induces emotions in the viewer. In the film, that event is set in the background; we are not to engage with it so that we may encounter other dimensions.**

You bring up a good example. Almost concurrently with the shooting of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, Sergei Parajanov was making *The Color of Pomegranates*/Sayat Nova in Armenia. They didn't know each other at the time. Years later, when the Russian Embassy gave permission to screen *The Color of Pomegranates* in Iran — which happened thanks to Arby's efforts[13] — we noted that Parajanov also used the same method of quick and short cuts in some of his scenes. By the way, Arby had used that technique in his other film, *Lebbæus/Thaddæus* (The Black Church), which he made prior to *The Spring*/Cheshmeh.

**In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, there was deliberation on cinematic language as a tool.**

Yes, exactly. I believe imagery and composition in the frame were of paramount importance to him; he has been able to produce a beautiful and very meaningful film that captivates us, whether we agree with it or not. Iranian critics were not familiar with that visual language and failed to write proper critiques of the film. That's because *The Spring*/Cheshmeh was a novel and captivating film that on the other hand didn't fit then-current parameters.

Imagery and composition were very important in his theatre productions as well, to the extent that in his later works he tried to communicate with the audience only in that language; apparently the fact that the majority was unfamiliar with his visual language didn't matter to him.

## Saeed Aqiqi, *Film critic and instructor, screenwriter*

Tehran, winter 2007

**Let's start with the background in which filmmakers like Arby Ovanessian began to work. What factors contributed to the emergence of New Wave filmmakers?**

New Wave Iranian filmmaking in the 1960s owed itself to a pool of educated individuals in the public sector taking cinema seriously in organizations like the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (*Kanoon*)[14] and TelFilm.[15] That aside, the private sector is following the same track today that it did in the 1950s.

[13] See PROLOGUE I, 1973.

[14] *Kanoon-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-e Koodakan va Nojavanan* was founded in 1965 under the direction of Lily Amir-Arjomand. Filmmakers associated with the Kanoon over time included Abbas Kiarostami, Amir Naderi, Bahram Beyzaie, Majid Majidi, Mohammad Reza Aslani, Sohrab Shahid-Saless, and animators Ali Akbar Sadeqi, Arapic Baghdasarian, Farshid Mesghali, and Noureddin Zarrinkelk. Tr

[15] TelFilm was founded in 1973 as a division of NIRT under the direction of Sassan Veyssi. Filmmakers associated with the studio over time included Bahman Farmanara, Dariush Mehrjui, Farrokh Gaffari, Fereydoun Rahnema, Hazhir Dariush, Parviz Kimiavi, Sohrab Shahid-Saless, and Zakaria Hashemi. Tr

**Tell us about *The Spring*/Cheshmeh and its unique features.**

It's one of the few films in the history of Iranian cinema that tampers with time and juxtaposes events.

**Meaning our perception of time is not bound by the duration of the event? That in fact, our perception of time is nullified and replaced by timelessness, which allows us to get inside the visual construct and composition of the image that's before us?**

Exactly. Because Iranian film directors are usually dependent on stories, they have to observe certain conventions; and their chief concern is continuity. For instance, they say we shift time, but if we move from one location to another, we return to the original location, so the audience doesn't lose track of time. That is a classic realist approach to the notion of time. Their other ground rule is they ask, this image is from whose point of view, and then they have to explain that it's such a character who's having a flashback.

There are absolutely no such things in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh. For example, in the scene where the Goldsmith's Son puts out his arm over the pool and gradually rises from there, with a graphic montage, you see that in the next shot he's in the desert. Here, time has been cut out and flashed forward. The other point is the visual and graphic composition of these two shots, that is, there's a shared movement in both, based on which the filmmaker reduces and increases the latitude of the image timewise, which was a novelty at the time and still is.

**The editing in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is also unconventional. For example, in the suicide scene of The Master's Wife, the audience gets fragmentary information; various parts of the event are presented with a few short cuts. The shots that follow one another do not show the event there and then but point to something that's happened earlier.**

There are different kinds of editing in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, depending on what is to be shown. For instance, the scene where the women expose The Master's Wife unfolds very rapidly in the mis en scène and has a fast pulse. There are also other scenes that unfold very slowly. One can see several of that kind; shots that through imagery or music give the viewer a chance to concentrate and reflect. In the shots of the woman's suicide, for example, the pulse is somewhat fast, but in the scene where her husband buries her, it's very slow. In the scene of the Vegetable Farmer's suicide, there's a distance between what's on that person's mind before his suicide and afterwards, and its impact on us. What's important here is the audience's rational response not their emotional response.

The director eliminates suspense in the imagery of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh before a suspense develops in a situation, and before the effect it's expected to produce. The middle has in effect been cut out. One scene unfolds very slowly with no cuts, or he will unexpectedly cut certain segments out of a scene.

There is a very moving sequence in his documentary *Lebbæus Who Was Named Thaddæus* (The Black Church). Certain ceremonies are underway in the church; the bride and groom's hands are cut to a close-up as they move close to one other, which is both very exciting and very dramatic, though it's a documentary. Here, it's purely the image that speaks.

**What is the reason for stripping down a real event?**

To make the audience engage mentally and rationally; also, it stops them from getting involved emotionally. Thus, it's rarely done in Iranian films.

**Why couldn't this film establish a broad and befitting connection to audiences?**

Audiences will reject a movie that doesn't match their ways. *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, which pauses on the image of a piece of paper for a few seconds and disrupts the continuity of time and space is meaningless for the audience. This film influences the road ahead and opens new paths to film language.

*The Spring*/Cheshmeh is a film that follows a dialectical structure and engages with the audience's mind and power of reasoning, while in general, audiences expect to engage with a film emotionally and take its events as real; that is, identify with a character and drown in the story. In other words, the audience yearns to drown in the "real event," while a film like *The Spring*/Cheshmeh strips the real event off its essence; in a sense, its treatment of the film's topic approaches non-Aristotelian structures. In a modern film like *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, there's no room for such conventions. Close-up shots are rare in the film and its plot devices are totally confusing for an audience addicted to classic movies.

The mainstay of classic movies is the story; those movies are like stories by Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo, for instance, rather than resembling, say, William Faulkner. Of course, when you watch the film today, you no longer find it as complex; the audience has grown more attuned to new experiences in cinema. *The Spring*/Cheshmeh applies almost none of the models that are familiar to the audience, although the story itself is very simple on the surface. A tragic relationship between three men and a woman that uncoupled from the film's visual style, might have even been entertaining. But I repeat, the film's focus is on imagery not on plot; the film wants to engage its audience mentally and rationally.

The film has a number of shocking scenes that are a testament to its visual success: the manner of depicting the Vegetable Farmer's death, which recalls Bresson's *au hasard Balthazar,* or the sacrifice of the lambs in his documentary, *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus*. Likewise, the sequence of the Goldsmith's Son in the desert with that incredible graphic editing that I mentioned earlier shows how far removed the film is from current Iranian cinema, though an audience that is unfamiliar with that kind of language rejects it and the film remains in the shadows. However, the young generation of cinephiles that watch the film today are more comfortable with that language than in the past.

**Sociological considerations aside, is there a characteristic that is unique to Ovanessian?**

To me, he's the model of a disciplined artist and has none of the disturbing carelessness of most Iranian film directors. His work is marked by vigilance and austerity. That has also found its way into his shot list. The framing in *The Spring*/*Cheshmeh* is very organized and compact. To better understand this compactness in his work, I suggest comparing *The Spring*/Cheshmeh with a few contemporaneous films such as Masoud Kimiai's *Kaiser*/Qeysar, Amir Naderi's *Goodbye Friend*/Khodahafez Rafiq, Bahram Beyzaie's *Downpour*/Ragbar, and even Dariush Mehrjui's first three films.

In the films that I named, there is a kind of arbitrary shot list that has no specific order

and continuity. For instance, Mehrjui's *Cow*/Gav is composed of a series of superfluous and irrelevant shots that the audience, by being immersed in Gholamhossein Sa'edi's moving story, seldom notices. Or take *Downpour*, which is also driven by plot and has little visual significance. My point is to emphasize the visual identity of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh vis-à-vis contemporaneous movies.

I feel that along with Golestan, Shahid-Saless, Aslani, Taqva'i, and Rahnema, he's a filmmaker for whom visual quality has priority and his images do not merely tell the story. The discipline, compactness, and austerity that I mentioned are the product of studying, practice, and trying different ways to execute an idea, in a way that is specific to film language. My respect for him comes from noting this artistic discipline in his work. The respect that *The Spring*/Cheshmeh has gained among his young fans in recent years is due to that same discipline and austerity.

## Mohammad Reza Aslani — *Writer, filmmaker*

Tehran, winter 2010

**In your view, what was the relationship between Ovanessian's short career in cinema and the problems with *Mrs. Ahou's Husband*/Shohar-e Ahou Khanum, and why did he, after *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, stop making films and resorted to theatre?**

Arby didn't resort to theatre for he was, really, a master in that field; despite his youth; a modern master. On the other hand, I do know that Arby's heartbeat for cinema and that he was stoic enough not to let anyone know about his pain.

Ovanessian's next film, Jami's *Salaman va Absal*, was delayed due to issues that I may have been unaware of, organizational issues that he wouldn't divulge and kept secret. There are many other secrets besides that he has not divulged. At any rate, the Revolution happened, and he stayed in the West with a carry-on, with no francs. But his life was art in the sense of a modern artist. Any category of art. If it couldn't be cinema, then theatre, if it couldn't be theatre, stage design, if that couldn't be, research; he had no other life, he doesn't, he didn't, he doesn't.

**In several shots in *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus*, the image stays on the subject without moving. In those shots, like the shot of the altar that is static and long, the subject acquires a signal presence and provides visual continuity. On the other hand, there is a sequence in the film where the shots are announced, and the film crew is present. Reality next to the cinematic recording of reality. What sort of cinematic functions does the realism of these two images serve?**

When he made *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus,* that astonishing passing of the shadow of the cloud over the plain and reaching the church and lingering on the passage of that symbolic shadow; the prayer-like fixed gaze; the silent remembering of presence and the altar and also the holy communion. The iconoclasm of the intrusion of an alien element into this self-contained holy space. The presence of a reality — the film crew — which is a non-symbolic and objective reality within the symbolic reality.

Examples of the token of the presence of a research group or the film crew in documentary

filmmaking existed at the time; his was not just a token but the exploration of the presence of two realities and a kind of iconoclasm for which a term hadn't even been coined in those years. A static or fixed structure that is broken in two conditions, one, the condition of the pilgrims in the carnivalesque enjoyment of pilgrimage, and the other, the presence of the backstage onstage. Like the presence of a painter in van Eyck's portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Arnolfini.

All the above was a progressive outlook that with denigration some local filmmakers and screenwriters and masters of every trade and advisers in every domain disparagingly declared it would be better if he did not make films, and it was said that he's a good theatrician — which is an example of the destructive criticism of those times and still today.

That film is still a happy memory of black and white images of a pilgrimage that is an ancient tradition of Christian-Armenian journeys of pilgrimage. And that ancient church, that pictorial gaze, nourished on the visual understanding of the bas-reliefs — a structural understanding of how to approach a subject, architecture, ritual and anti-ritual. And it is that same enlightening sensitivity to anti-ritual that is an intricate critique of the destruction of that which, beyond ritual and anti-ritual, can be the body and reside among us. Or is residing among us. It is that same expository critique that displeased the commissioners. And that itself was another experience in losing interest in commissions, disillusionment and cutting away from the continuum of a professional career as a cinematographer, a sorrow that Arby Ovanessian never bared openly.

**In the early sequences of *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus*, the treatment of various aspects of the pilgrims' lives, including the way the lamb is sacrificed, the pilgrims' collective actions and behavior, the wedding ceremony, and other subjects, gradually acquires more weight next to the ritual ceremonies of holy communion in The Black Church. In your view, what is the meaning of the film's final sequence — where a young girl is collecting trash out of the pile of garbage left behind by the pilgrims (humanity) — in relation to the rest of the film?**

We better not explain it. For we're not supposed to explain it and assume that that's it and nothing but. Rather, the film itself as an exegetic critique transforms each segment into the critique of the next segment. The overall theme of the film is essentially the consumed leftovers of a ritual and of eating a body. A ritual that is consummated without succeeding in re-creating an initiation by definition from one state of being to another. The end of the era of rituals and the start of global consumerism, including the consumption of rituals. Consumption of the church by the body. Consumption of the ritual of rebirth. And the leftovers of a massive pile of garbage.

What is the filmmaker himself looking for in this garbage? Amid the consumed leftovers, this is the story of the self and the subject. *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus* and also *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, is nostalgia for a death that defines life.

**How are the visual movements and the sounds of *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus*, and later, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, developed, and basically, why are they important? For instance, before seeing the Goldsmith's Son in the pool, we see the empty pool for a while, as if so long as the frame is empty in relation to the space outside it, it may be fraught with any kind of movement. Same with the soundtrack in *Lebbæus*/*Thaddæus*, like the sequence of the baby's baptism in the church — where the shots are synchronized with the sound of hammering nails with**

**no on location live audio — it holds a kind of historical memory inside.**

The fact is that whether in *Lebbæus/Thaddæus,* or later in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, it's not only a visual sensibility and a painterly view of space but a structure that takes the essence of the narrative to a visual composition of the narrative; it's a communication scheme.

The image is a world, part of which takes shape in the frame, not as a self-sufficient entity but as a representation or recollection of the image of the whole world, and it is out of this declarative image that something more important unfolds. As such, the image is not the cessation of sight but the extension and continuity of sight and what has been excluded suddenly becomes present. In this exclusion and presence, the excluded presence, sound also has a foundational role — the role of a herald that summons the image, so the image may find its strength, so it may summon the world in a series of connected meanings. Summon that which is invisible.

Sound, outside the frame and the main image, outside the frame, summons the image and the sound within the frame. But it isn't only the presence inside and outside the frame that effects such a dialogue and such a mutual summoning; it is also the image itself, the sound outside the image — for instance, the asynchronous sound of hammering nails during the baby's baptism — that with a straightforward interpretation may be understood as announcing the presence of the past and the future in the present, which is a birth bearing witness to a future martyrdom; a future in the past and a past that becomes present in the future. A dialogue or dialectic.

This combination of an absent sound and present image acts in Bresson's work as the out-of-frame sound — herald and evoker — and in Ovanessian's works runs through the whole structure. This structural scheme is not limited to a stylistic function, rather, while being one of the elements of style, it can be applied more broadly.

**How would you describe Ovanessian's use of imagery and cinematographic language in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh to render his adaptation, or more precisely abstraction, of the original story?**

Whether *Lebbæus/Thaddæus,* a documentary where the subject of the church — the body — finds meaning in the Eucharist, or *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, which on the face of it is an adaptation of *The Spring of Heghnar*, the work is not an adaptation but an exegetic critique. Like what Bresson does with Dostoevsky's writings in his structuralist critique. But in my view, the structuralist extension is more multifaceted in Ovanessian's work.

He is not a storyteller. He's an exegete; not only an exegete of the world or the world of texts, but an exegete of images — a text that he himself creates, a dual exegesis. The image of the exegete and the direct exegesis of that image that is composed or cleansed of all that is superfluous. This image doesn't reflect itself like a mirror but reflects what is before it. The mirror-like reflection of the image has to be cleansed of the superfluous — the patina — to have the capacity for reflectiveness. Like the empty pool. The inner void of the character that has to become present. This empty pool is the reflected mirror of the character and the silence of a fear of an event that has occurred but must needs recur. An event in the past that shall now explode in the near future.

**In 1968, the invitation to collaborate with NITV presented a suitable opportunity to the young filmmaker. Ovanessian considers *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, and Nasser Taqva'i's *Tran-***

***quility in the Presence of Others*/Aramesh dar Hozour-e Digaran, both produced in collaboration with NITV, important steps toward turning to serious literature, and points out that his adaptation of the novel was not tied to the story but merely inspired by it. What is the difference, and the special significance, of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh's approach to plot and storyline relative to other contemporaneous film adaptations?**

*The Spring*/Cheshmeh is one of several films in the world that goes beyond adaptation, or goes beyond the original, and itself turns into a new cinematic novel. One can essentially call it a literary image of a text, which turns into a metatext, and in that transcendence not only revisits the earlier text but itself transforms into a different account of the world as an autonomous text. In his work, adaptation is not merely a reading of the text, but is itself the finding of another text. I could say, it no longer relates to the text of *The Spring of Heghnar*; it is finding a spring.

Arby's encounter with religion in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is not a presentation of the church; rather, the text merely serves him as a source of implicit pointers. It's the launch pad into the world of death until the arrival at life. The images of this film have life, and their existence is constantly interpreted or validated, finds meaning, through recounting death. Thus, in their inner movements, the images have no choice but to have a static appearance. The film has a quintessential movement. The initiation rite: *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is the discoverer of that life-image.

I would point to the image of the tree in the film — The Master. The image itself within the collection of images that precede or follow it is a ritual presence that initiates the dead man in the past and the future and the static image in the past and the future to actuality or the instantaneity of existence. This multifaceted act enables the vivifying continuum of images throughout the film. Thus, the cuts in the film are the cuts of a movement that forms contiguous time.

In the film, it's the spring itself that is defined, not the story; *that* is what differentiated this film from then-current cinema or film adaptations and does still today. And its continuity was eclipsed due to the animosity of the critique and critics and it became an isolated film in the history of Iranian cinema.

**What do you think of the cinematic mises en scène, the actors' movements, and the film's visual language?**

The mise en scène, the actors' movements, and the visual language achieve unity in the film and the visual order itself is the organizing principle of these three elements. Here, editing is the relation between two efficiencies. Such a relationship becomes the direct connection between discrete times, not their continuity but times that in their efficiencies find one another, or where each is a memory of itself, each time and each space an associated memory of the previous time-space. That is why we are constantly confronted with the future in the past. A future that while being a future is itself the past of a coming future.

One can see an abstract of this mise en scène in the brilliant water games of the naked children, in the creek, and in the spattering of light.[16] This mise en scène, which has been composed within

[16] As a free motif, the image is seen here where children are at play; it is also cut into the sequence where The Master is ritually memorialized by a gathering of his friends seated under the old tree. AO

the narrative like a documentary scene, itself points to another moment. Spraying water by the children is an excuse for spattering light, like festive fireworks scattering life joyfully before the nakedness of death. This use of free motifs applies to the entire film as well. A kind of holography where a particle is not a part of the whole, but carries the whole, and where that same cell or particle can reconstruct the entire mass. The film achieved a kind of holographic vision of fundamental particles back then that today, nearly forty years later, cinema as a whole — our drama — is still unaware of.

**The opening title of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh is followed by a verse from the New Testament [Revelation 9.6]: "And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them." One can see the presence of death, along with life, throughout the film. From the first shots, we face the death of The Master; as the film continues, we enter a time before his death. How do you see Ovanessian's view of death — which is a common thread in the plays he has directed and even in his screenplays — and how do you think it manifests in his work?**

While not religious, he had a mystical understanding and vision of the world. While not a philosopher or a student of philosophy, he had a philosophical or cosmological depth about issues and life. Why am I saying had, while God bless him, he's alive, and still has. Though a spring is essentially the symbol of birth, in its symbolic juxtaposition in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, it is an expression of the effluence and inevitability of death. The two symbols are constantly transformed into one another in this film and conflated.

*The Spring*/Cheshmeh and his chosen plays are the contemplation of death in tragic lives and finding the intensity of existence in its most quiet moment.

His images are not derived from the mises en scène or the existing scenes; the image has not been obtained; rather, the image has been forged. Thus, the image stands before the world like a critical text and confronts the world with a philosophical question. A question in the manner of Khayyam. What is this world? Can the world recreate anything besides its own symbols? This image making, forging images instead of obtaining images, building drama, instead of dealing with drama, having a dramatic expression, instead of having a dramatic story, is not just a divergence, but a kind of deliberated cosmology. Without a deliberated cosmology, forging images will not be possible.

This painterly vision of composition in Ovanessian's work is not merely a physical composition — otherwise it would end with his stage graphic design — but an attempt to assemble all the elements, to consider fullness and void, scrutinize the concept of being and non-being, death and life, whether in the spatiality of the stage or in the contiguity of time in the drama; it has to do with his mediated concept of cosmology. Alas, unchivalrous times did not let the visualization of this thought to reach its logical conclusion.

# Cinema
# II

# Selected Interviews with Arby Ovanessian

## An Interview with the Young Filmmaker

*Ayandegan* 17 July 1968

**Why and how did you turn to theatre away from cinema? Which one offers more possibilities in your view, cinema or theatre?**

I didn't turn to theatre away from cinema! Each of these domains has its own special boundaries and real art is understanding these boundaries and making use of them. What really draws me to cinema and theatre is the deep divide that exists between these two art forms. As for comparing their potential, both offer myriad possibilities for expression.

**Tell us about your last film, *Lebbæus/Thaddæus*. Aside from its documentary elements related to The Black Church, what themes did you find relevant for your personal expression?**

With every new film, I try to get to know myself during the time I'm making the film. Each of my films is a sort of exercise in learning about "me" at a specific time. So, when I choose a theme, I observe myself in the context of that theme or situation or find myself. *Lebbæus/Thaddæus* is such a film as well. For me, The Black Church and the Armenian pilgrimage is merely a means, an excuse. The film indirectly addresses a lot of topics that seem simple on the surface but are very complex internally.

**What is it that you want to express in your works generally?**

My goal in cinema is to transcend the external form of the image. In using imagery, sound and time, I'm not interested in seeing their outward manifestation. The idea might be summed up as Gnostic cinematography, I don't know.

**What are your thoughts on the technique of avant-garde cinema and how it compares with standard cinema?**

Look! Standard cinema uses conventions to achieve its goal, while avant-garde films find their meaning in rejecting conventions. Consequently, the expressive power of this new cinema increases by the day. Standard cinema remains a storyteller while in avant-garde films even the term technique is losing its conventional sense and will come to be something totally different.

**Tell us about filming *Mrs. Ahou's Husband* and why the work has stopped?**

I took the book *Mrs. Ahou's Husband* with me when I went abroad to study. I thought about making this film the whole time I was there. Negotiations with the film's producer started from London. I had worked on the project for five years. Filming started fastidiously in September 1966, but altercations and squabbles started right away, and production was temporarily put on hold.[17] At issue was the goal of the film.

Initially, the idea was to make a low-budget film free of standard rules and restrictions. An Iranian film, not a FilmFarsi; a film where the plot was merely a means, not an end. But the producer (who was underwriting the major portion of the budget) suddenly realized that given the book's popularity he could pre-sell his film. However, the film that I had begun would eliminate that option. The buyers didn't get the segments that I had filmed. They said, *Unknown actors*? *A novice director*? *This stuff's good for nothing but festivals*! although that was not my goal. Next came the question of rights. They offered to transfer to me the rights that they had obtained from the author based on my screenplay for fifty percent of the film's production budget, later lowered to twenty-five percent, plus ten percent of sales. Afghani did not agree and told me, "They got it from me for free and now they want to hoodwink you." On hearing "hoodwink," everything shattered for me and I couldn't even think about the film anymore. Even when the producer proposed renewing our collaboration, I declined. Later, with several changes in the cast, they made the film with FilmFarsi actors.[18] So, fortunately, the scenes that I shot will not be in the film.[19]

**To what extent can the support that NITV has provided for Iranian New Wave cinema — which applies to you as well — have a positive impact?**

I do believe that switching from an individual to an organization can help resolve some production problems. The producer has changed into the television, which has more financial resources and can therefore fund, distribute, and publicize films more easily. As a result, today a lot of good films are being produced by television channels around the world.

**How much success can current avant-garde Iranian films expect to achieve in international festivals?**

The participation or success of a film in a festival is not that closely related to the quality of the film. It only helps introduce the film and its director. Iranian cinema with its new image needs to be introduced. For a young filmmaker or newcomer who shuns old rules and restrictions, a festival is their only recourse. If we think of and value festivals more highly than that, we might make a mistake in evaluating the works.

[17] On 12 Feb. 1967, while production was on pause, my cameraman Mr. Davoud Mollapour took it upon himself to register portions of my screenplay — which he had cut down and mutilated — in his own name. The 33-page document is housed in the Tehran Museum of Cinema. For other details about the film's background see PROLOGUE I, 1964, '66, '67 & 2013. AO

[18] In 1968, the film, directed by Mollapour and shot by another cameraman, was released in public theatres. For Ovanessian's response to the film see Pardis, "Shohar-e Ahou Khanoum Hichgouneh Arzesh-e Cinema-i Nadarad ke Man Ede'a-ye Sakhtan-e anra Dashteh-basham!" *Setareh Cinema*, 23 Dec. 1968.

[19] In 2013, the unfinished sequence that I had directed in 1966 with Mollapour as my cameraman was screened at the Tehran Museum of Cinema. AO

**How about your works? Have you achieved any recognition in that domain?**

When one of my films participated in four festivals,[20] the only thing that I've cherished since is the level of my joy at the time. Prizes, honorary diplomas, and testimonials are all empty and meaningless and worthless. You know, participating in a festival is like a complimentary ticket you may suddenly receive to see a famous film. That's all, nothing more.

**Thank you. I hope we'll have a chance to talk more extensively after the screening of your latest film.**

## For Me, Cinema Is a Serious Affair

By Jamshid Akrami, *Film and Art*, 22 April – 11 May 1972

**What made you decide to make a feature-length film despite your past (and of course current) success in theatre?**

Given the experience I had at the start of my first feature-length film, *Mrs. Ahou's Husband,* I needed to take up a work that was the natural outgrowth of my aspirations but where no-one could again interfere in the production process. I therefore started a work that wasn't beholden to anyone or anything or any organization, and that work is *The Spring*/Cheshmeh.

We started filming toward the end of last fall; though the filming schedule didn't go over fifty days, shooting the film extended to this spring owing to seasonal issues. What's important is that everyone who played a part in making this film, whether the actors or the technical crew, approached the work with total dedication and sincerity and each has tried in their own way to help produce this film.

**It seems you want to keep *The Spring*/Cheshmeh under wraps on purpose until its screening. There's been no substantial news report about it in the press to date, nor any photographs.**

I don't think that's on purpose; it may have been necessary. Its actors are Arman, Mashayekhi, Pourhosseini, and Nojoumi; in the case of Nojoumi and Pourhosseini, it's their first film work. The cinematography was done by Nemat Haqiqi. He, too, this is his first feature film. The rest of those that have collaborated as technical crew are NITV employees or students at the College of Film and Television. From my point of view, the film's music is the film's sounds and the cutting of its images. Also, it's a film of very few words. It may have about twenty minutes of dialogue maximum.

**Is that because you wanted your film to have more of a "visual language"?**

It wasn't on purpose, it was necessary. Also, in this film the camera does not move at all and is

[20] *Parvana* was the official British entry in the Animated Films category at several festivals, among them, Oberhausen in Germany (1966) and Cinestud in the Netherlands (1967)

always static, except in two shots. This may suggest the film is theatrical, while that's not the case at all; presenting it in theatre the way it is in film was not possible at all.

**You haven't said anything about the film's background story.**

The story of the film is one of "love and romance". There is a married couple and two other men who are in love with this woman and others that we come across accidentally!

**The team of main actors includes two professionals and two who are unversed in cinema or are at least only "semi-professional". On the other hand, given your goal, you could have used either professional and seasoned actors throughout, or alternatively, novices and amateurs.**

In this film, acting is not what has been prevalent to date. For me, the existence of these people and their presence was enough to count as acting, and my request to professional actors like Arman and Mashayekhi was to just be present. They simply had to be present in certain situations without the usual psychology that actors use to get to know and develop their characters in a story or in a film.

**Was this mode of expression adopted by design or did it take shape organically?**

This mode of expression in cinema is, in effect, exactly like grammar. In everyday conversation, one may sometimes change the order of subject and predicate, for instance. That's where a similarity arises between poetic and prosaic language. In this film, nothing is spoken according to rules and regulations; rather, the expression has evolved from the natural growth process. Grammar is always an "aid" not the "goal". If we always followed grammar, "expression" would deadlock after a while.

**Is there anything else you would like to say about the nature of the film?**

It's a film that's supposed to be a film. And the question of who might come by and see it is not the film's concern.

**Do you mean that you didn't have the audience in mind while making the film?**

No, not a particular type or class. I don't think I could do that at all. Individual or group, they can find their relationship with the film or not, and that's got nothing to do with the slogan, "art for art's sake". It's a fact.

**So, you didn't take the market and the film's customer into account while making the film!**

I wasn't making a film that could recoup its costs over such and such a period. The economic question was not an issue. Look, you have something that you say and a sentiment that you express. Now, whether there's a market for what you have to say or not is a different question. I think if you coordinate your sentiments and behavior relative to the customer you've

lied. I repeat, provided you have something to say or a sentiment. The main point, anyway, is producing a film and other questions have a secondary importance. And I don't feel any obligation to place myself in this equation in a position that from the point of view of importance is in a secondary place.

**What did you think about cinema before making this film, and from what angle do you see cinema now? Has your viewpoint changed in the interval?**

Cinema has general characteristics but it's natural for it to find new coordinates in each work. In any evaluation, whatever has to do with taste is of very little importance. My personal taste doesn't throw any light on any issue or negate it. The question is about an expressive totality, meaning an expression that is conveyed via cinema. Not art and not theatre, etc. That is where I can say that my viewpoint of cinema has not changed. It's the same viewpoint I had before starting this film. As for my taste, I should say that it's natural for it to develop. That's all.

## The Spring/Cheshmeh Aims to Change how We Assimilate Cinema

*Tamasha*, February 1973

**You were active in theatre for years and still are, meaning it's been at your disposal as a means of expression. What made you turn to cinema?**

The opposite is in fact true. I turned to theatre from cinema. My studies were in cinema and I made three short films before I directed theatre — two in England and one in Iran — that were three different genres of work: fiction, animation, and documentary.

**Doesn't directing both cinema and theatre create problems?**

No. That's because these are two entirely different modes of expression and superficial similarities aside, each has its own language at its core. . . These two languages are like two opposing forces and movements, and naturally, I don't think the language of one, in its own essence and substance, can ever be applicable in the other, although they may appear similar on the surface.

**Don't these opposing forces neutralize each other?**

No, in fact they create a balance. One compensates the shortcomings of the other. In having theatre, I feel cinema, and in having cinema, theatre, more intensely.

**The type of work you do in cinema and theatre, and your beliefs, show an inseparable tie to personal matters, like someone who's fenced himself in and doesn't see others at all, while in fact cinema and theatre have to do with people.**

I don't consider my work personal. I try to be true to myself. What that means is that when I feel a need, the only work I find worthwhile is to fulfill that need. But a need invariably takes

on different forms. By personal matters you mean people's inner and spiritual needs, which is summed up in your term "personal". But business is also a personal matter. It's just that I don't do business with this mode of expression and I don't cater to people's basal needs. In principle, I respect myself, so I can respect others.

**You said you don't cater to people's basal needs in cinema. That's a fair statement but do you believe *The Spring*/Cheshmeh caters to people's "next level needs"?**

*The Spring*/Cheshmeh tries to make the viewer pay attention to other questions. When these questions are posed in a work of art, they can't be circumscribed; rather, one can reflect on, feel, and discuss them, and draw one's own general and personal conclusions. That's where a work of art starts to be differentiated. If the work has any roots, its growth and impact will also last longer, and if it has no roots, it's more superficial and short-lived; it will be forgotten sooner. We're used to assimilating cinema in a certain way. *The Spring*/Cheshmeh aims to change how we assimilate cinema.

**Which is no small task. Do you think it will succeed?**

Right now, it's not possible to give a yes or no answer. The answer can only lie in how it will perform.

**Based on *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, it seems that to bring about change, you want to bypass time.**

It's about being faithful to realities and needs. I'll make a film when I feel it's necessary to make it, whether my previous work has been a financial success or not.

**Why was it necessary for you to make *The Spring*/Cheshmeh?**

Naturally, the first feature-length film follows conclusions a film director has drawn from their other works. By need is meant something akin to hunger and thirst. There are people whose life, the meaning of whose life, their work, is deeply tied to their expression; that's the kind of need I'm talking about. The word begs for action. And if the need is very intense, one finds a way and actualizes the need.

**But why didn't you use other means like literature, for instance, to actualize that need? It's both easier and less costly.**

Because my expressive sensibilities achieve their meaning better in these two mediums, theatre and cinema. My thinking is of a kind that finds expression best in these two mediums.

**Experimentation was not the goal?**

No.

**You did not turn to cinema with the intent to experiment from the outset?**

No, this is how I essentially approach cinema.

**Do you object to experimental cinema?**

No. My work is not experimental cinema. My work is cinema. For me, cinema is a ritual; and if by "experimental" you mean the current usage of that term, it doesn't apply to my work.

**Given your lack of interest in the box office you could have met your need by making an 8 mm or 16 mm movie instead of a 35 mm, 2-hour-long, commercial film which, on the other hand, does not have a public. Would you agree that taking the public into account is important in cinema?**

Yes, but with one key difference. One must not submit to public opinion when making films.

**But those who see the film, ought they be able to get the answer from the film itself, should they understand?**

Understanding and explaining is a vague issue. Understanding, explaining, have more complex and hidden undercurrents. It's a mistake to accept majority opinion as the yardstick or the benchmark for evaluation. And that has nothing to do with levels of education. The essential point is that something has been created. Why has it been created? Is there a problem?

**For the majority of those who saw *The Spring*/Cheshmeh at the [1972] Tehran Festival — people who had an affinity for cinema — this film was unintelligible. How do you respond to that?**

Two people may look at water and due to the difference in their needs at that moment, ascribe dual meanings to water. That is what *The Spring*/Cheshmeh proposes in terms of expression. It's meaningful or meaningless relative to people's needs. There's no scale at work to try and weigh the majority and the minority.

**Does that mean all who have seen *The Spring*/Cheshmeh have unfulfilled basal needs?**

That's not what I'm saying. . . To date and all along, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh has been in an intense relationship in regards the audience, meaning that the audience has wanted to understand the film. They have disliked or liked the film. That's the fact of the matter. It's unrelated to ticket sales or to publicity. It had even been prejudged; that, too, has no direct relevance to the film. None of these factors disturb the built-in concentration in the film. Now, for some, it's understandable and meaningful and for others, it's meaningless.

**What do you mean by concentration?**

Concentration in the sense that all the elements that have been brought into play in the film,

all the expressive elements, from human to technique to technology, are coasting toward one point. Meaning the production work acts exactly like a magnifier that concentrates the sun's rays unto one point. That point can, if positioned over an object that's weaker than itself, illuminate or burn it. I believe that's happened in *The Spring*/Cheshmeh. The other issues are not my concern.

**Let's talk about the structure of the film. A film camera can be made to move in the same way as a human head. In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, you have not used that option that produces a natural effect. As a result, the structure of the film, while simple, is unnatural. Why is your camera static?**

It's because this film tries to film a kind of movement that cannot be filmed, cannot be seen but exists. One might say, at a very general level, that it tries to film the movement between relationships. That suggests its own structure by necessity. In this film, structure comes down to perception. Perception in the sense of the way and the order in which you "perceive" people, situations, objects, sounds, and times. These relationships, these orders, are the movements of this film. I'll explain through music. You pick seven notes to say what you want to say. Each of those seven notes is bound by certain limits; they don't entail all possible sounds. Nevertheless, to give form to the music we accept this limitation and then start to play within those boundaries. In the music that we create, we sometimes succeed in letting the other sounds that are not contained within those notes be produced and be heard.

The seemingly static perception of objects, people, situations, and so forth allows the movement that a moving camera cannot film in this particular situation, be filmed. In any event, a camera's sight is a limitation. Within that limitation, you pick yet other limits. Meaning you pick certain limits with this limited apparatus. The main point is cinema. In fact, the word cinema means movement, and any film that evokes movement, that touches on an invisible movement is close to its expression — to cinema — at a very fundamental and deep level. A film is either cinema or it isn't cinema. Where we make a mistake is that we have grown used to seeing only one type of movement. A person walking is movement. A person at rest is also movement, but of a different kind. Imagine a cliff with sea waves striking it and receding. Where is the movement, in the cliff that is standing still or in the water that strikes the cliff and recedes? It's in such a circuit that the cinema I'm talking about begins.

The play that exists between the elements generates a movement. In cinema, we've grown used to seeing the external movement. There are other movements that are not visible to the eye but whose impact can be sensed — for instance, the movement of time, the movement of life, and so on. All these have a cinematic potential in them. They have a potential for locomotive expression.

**So, you believe that if we show a person staring at a point for an hour with his hand under his chin, seemingly thinking — a mental movement — that's cinema.**

Mental movement is one of the movements. But in a situation where someone is staring out with his hand under his chin, if the film goes on for a long while, if you pay attention, you'll notice other movements as well. The first thing you notice may be "duration," which naturally testifies to the movement of time. Afterwards, you may notice very slight movements in his face that you wouldn't notice under ordinary circumstances. As an example, I'll mention the

first shot of *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, which relates to your question.

In that shot, a paper dart lands before the camera's field of vision in a natural movement. On the surface, nothing moves after this movement. Time passes. It's during this time that we notice or not . . . evidently, a breeze or wind is also blowing . . . the paper moves gently. The shadow of the tree's leaves that have fallen to the ground moves gently. Notice how many movements we can see or not in a single shot that lasts less than a minute, 48 seconds to be exact. Later, there's another movement that could be meaningful for us, or not. And that is the question. Why can it be meaningful or not? About twenty minutes before the end of the film, we see the source of this paper dart's movement — it's a child who makes the paper dart as he plays and hurls it. But this child himself has other sources that we have seen during the film. The child's play also has premises; his situation also has premises. This film follows these kinds of movements, and at the end we land on a screen with no image.

**Besides movement, it seems there's another factor in cinema as well, which is the relation between movements?**

Yes, but again that has to do with which movement we relate to which movement. Right now, the movement of your hand produces a movement on the paper and letters get inscribed. But the movement of your hand is the result of a movement that is passing through me. The result of the movement that is passing through me is also something else. And that thing itself is again related to something else. Now, if you had an image of the movement of your hand and an image of me, in a cinematic situation we might be able to present the movement that spans in-between. But if we look at them separately, it will appear there is no relation. Meaning if the image of your hand were to be shown separately at a more distant time and my face at a different time, you will have seemingly broken the connection. But we know that was not originally the case. That's where the cinema that I have worked on begins to emerge and become meaningful.

**Your camera moves on two or three occasions.**

The camera moved when it was necessary to display a movement of a different kind. Wine has dissolved in water, joined the water's movement, entered the tree's trunk via the roots and the tree has grown. To film this "movement," the camera has moved.

**You also have a very lengthy scene of a woman's burial by The Master spring-builder. How do you explain that scene?**

It's several scenes from a specific angle. The husband is performing an arduous task, the burial of his wife. He endures it with great forbearance and hardship. To show the hardship, it's not enough to simply show an image of his face. This is a special kind of hardship. This scene in the film aims to convey the hardship, especially its endurance that is due to an obligatory relationship. In this action, which is a simple yet difficult task, the husband's relationship to his wife is revealed without any words being spoken. This is the only scene where we see the relationship between husband and wife. In other scenes, the woman has relationships with others.

**You show this hardship and its endurance by using a lengthy scene and its effect on the audience's endurance?**

The hardship is shown in a situation where the husband is burying his wife. He first pours dirt on the whole body and then covers the face with special care . . . he does that with love . . . and then covers the whole body with dirt. A long time passes for this relationship to be severed on the surface and when this surface relationship is severed, we become aware of a much deeper relationship.

**Based on what we know about your work, it appears you wish to ignore established rules in cinema, negate them, and devise new rules for yourself to replace the old.**

I don't decide in advance whether to break or accept a rule. If a rule serves a purpose, it's upheld. If it has to be broken, it's broken. I don't restrict myself to always either follow or break a rule. I might make a film in which the camera is always moving.[21]

**No, I didn't necessarily mean camera movement, I was thinking of lengthy shots, character development, and cases of that sort. In a normal movie, the characters have to be first introduced so that their problems and relationships can later have an impact, whereas woman's burial scene, for example, that we discussed has no impact on the viewer.**

In a film that is not concerned with storytelling, preaching, and moralizing, character development necessarily has a different meaning, acting has a different meaning, and inevitably, techniques will change in accord with them. Also, do you really believe the woman's burial has no impact? I don't believe that. You question is proof of its impact.

**Watching anything has some sort of impact, anyway. But the impact of the woman's burial scene is unrelated to anything we've seen in the film beforehand. In the abstract and in general, this scene and anybody's burial scene have an impact.**

In the structural design of the film, water, earth, growth, death, time, and timelessness are regularly brought into play. In such a design, when existence runs roots in the earth, when existence "outwardly" ends in the earth, burying love unquestionably addresses the structure of the film.

One could say the film is difficult to understand — I agree — but note that the difficulties, though numerous, are not impossible to resolve. Meaning with adequate attention, it's possible to grasp the meaning, "see" the relationships. If you question the film, you can find an answer in it for sure. Note that the "water fills up" the woman's grave. The pool is brimming with water, the same water that elsewhere runs to the tree.

[21] Case in point, AO's second feature film, *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life* (1985).

## The Ever-Flowing 'Spring': On a sacral Cinema

By Behnam Nateqi, *Ayandegan*, 19 February 1973

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh is based on *The Spring of Heghnar*, a novel by Armenian writer Mkrtich Armen, speaking of which Ovanessian says:**

What caught my attention in the book was the depth of the subject.

**In Armen's work, a fundamental question is raised: *In an urban setting where three ethnic groups, Armenian, Turkish-Muslim, and Greek, co-exist, which is more important, family or love?* A woman is married. Her husband is a benevolent man. But the woman loves a young man and on Sundays meets her lover in a Muslim district on the pretext of visiting her older son's graveside. Another man also loves this woman. For Armen, the moral of the story is simple: Love is more important. But Ovanessian hasn't filmed Armen's story in quite as simple a manner.**

I think my film is in the book, but the book's moral isn't in my film. That is exclusively due to a difference in goals. The same encounters, the same events, and the same relationships are there, but the values and the value judgements are different. In the book, the youth who wanders away to the desert grows old later on, and when he realizes that he's been deceived, feels regretful. That doesn't happen in the film. In the film, at that moment one era comes to an end and a new era begins.

**One thing that a comparison between Ovanessian's film and *The Spring of Haghnar* brings out is the flashbacks and time jumps in the film. These flashbacks occur in the book in the exact same way without confounding the reader. Ovanessian has used time jumps but has given them a meaning other than flashbacks.**

In the book, time jumps are a literary device, while the film's time jumps are totally different. Here, time jumps are locomotive concepts used to find or induce cinematic associations. To illustrate, when we jump from indoors outdoors, for instance, or from outdoors indoors or from the past to the present, or from the present to the past, none of these are devices for telling a story or an event. Rather, they're like a movement that flows between two words or two verses in poetry.

The goal was to "film" the depth of the story. It's like placing the camera outside a mountain to film a spring that flows inside it. That may seem like an impossible task, but we know it can be done.

**To visualize that goal, to capture the life that flows at the depths of the story, Ovanessian emphasizes certain moves, certain pauses; at times he gazes, he gazes for a very long time, and at times he searches for a movement in the depths of an object or a face. This technique has set the rhythm of the film apart from what we are familiar with and has rendered it uncommon.**

The notion of movement is altogether different from our common understanding of movement. Movements are always relative. They're varied. At a certain moment, some things may

alter more rapidly, transform more rapidly, some others more slowly. That's true in all realities, in all of life. Our capacity for understanding the movements of life varies. Each tradition, each culture, has a tempo peculiar to itself. One develops slowly, another, rapidly." **Thus, according to Arby, if we could alter our understanding of movements**, "we would see differently and feel differently. That's not the same as what's called alternative cinema today, which is nothing but a misnomer.

***Is The Spring*/Cheshmeh *Cinema*? Ovanessian has a simple answer:**

From the general public's point of view, I would say it's not cinema, because it doesn't have the appearance of cinema alone. In other words, the superficial devices of cinema have not been used, but the meaning of cinema has. **Thus, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, "**because it naturally follows a different kind of movement, because it has a different rhythm and flow," **impacts the viewer like a poem or a piece of music. "**It's unfamiliar. It's about inner movements, inner relationships."

**Ovanessian believes that if someone connects with the film only through their sensibilities and doesn't follow an established rule, they will get that essence. In justifying the film's movement and slow tempo, he refers to traditions and cultures:**

In the case of cinema, unlike music and poetry that in the East, given people's general mode of life has a special weight or status, its outward form has been borrowed from the West but the requisite work for its expression hasn't been done. A very strange and curious thing has happened in the East. Instead of a tradition, a culture, finding its own principles through the course of its life, all of a sudden, due to external developments in public media, it has accepted a principle or a law that is not necessarily liberating. It's not necessarily expressive. Expressiveness always lies in revealing inner movements. If we sense the premise and the source of this movement and understand it, the rest of the questions will be automatically resolved. In the same way, in traditions, the constructive rules of poetry or music with respect to form and meter are a sort of limitation for the limitless to become revealed. In Iranian films, this matter has received little attention.

***Family or Love*?**

**Of the three ethnic groups that live in the city, the film shows only two, Christians and Muslims. The mutual understanding between these two ethnic groups is slight not only because of their divergent religions but also due to their cultural differences. In the film, there is a light reference to this slight understanding. Ovanessian could have confined himself to the Armenian group, but as to why he has brought these two peoples face-to-face, he says**:

First, the ethnic groups have not been brought face-to-face; they're side-by-side. That's different. They carry on in parallel, not in opposition. Naturally, the two influence one another, meaning neither is isolated. For one very clear reason: When the woman steps outside her house she does not appear among her own crowd. We never see such a scene in the film. She appears, covered, among the other crowd. Externally, she becomes one of them. The rift, the difference, starts right there, meaning among her own crowd. Deep down, she knows she can't or shouldn't be that way. Therefore, she borrows a covering from the other crowd so that she

may gain that freedom outwardly or at least have the option to exercise such freedom. But in the other crowd also, the values prohibit granting her such freedom. As a result, she is in a situation where she cannot be sanctioned or understood by either side, in either crowd, and that is the lead-in to the whole question and topic of the film.

Thus, whatever action or reaction we witness is the outcome of the impossibility of grasping this woman's situation.

**In *The Spring*/Cheshmeh, this woman, Heghnar,[22] becomes the focal point of the film. In the original story by Mkrtich, the focal point is the Master spring-builder. Ovanessian explains the woman's predicament in the story as follows:**

This woman is at the crossroads of love. She loves her husband. She is a mother. In another context outside the family, she loves a young man; on the way to meeting him, someone else falls in love with her. What can this woman tell us? She is obviously cautious. She behaves one way at home, another way on the street; she wears a chador in the Muslim quarters, and . . . So, she's aware of the dichotomies but she cannot establish the right relationships. Her basic understanding of life contradicts both these two cultures. At heart, she's more like the tree in the film. But in practice, she's forced to put up a sort of act.

### *The Spring*/Cheshmeh *and the Audience*

**As others have repeatedly said in the past, and we have to repeat it as well, *The Spring*/Cheshmeh poses difficulties for the audience owing to its special approach to cinema, its cinematic language, its time jumps, and . . . Even the film's silence in the face of the question that it raises, and not insisting that if something, a problem, lacks a clear cut and precise answer, to definitely answer it directly so the film may not lack a moral, will at first surprise and then upset the audience if they have come to watch it based on standard criteria in cinema:**

It's not the film's responsibility to explain and advocate a moral. That's the job of those who dissect and analyze. The responsibility of a work of art lies in eliciting a certain movement, giving form to certain movements, calling attention to certain dimensions. If the work has any roots, its relation to external issues and life will gradually be discovered, its meaning, too.

**In this type of art if artists, driven by their own consciousness, driven by their own thoughts, act sincerely, they will inject specific complexities into their artwork. In their simplest and most humble form, these complexities may remain unknowable except to the artist:**

This film is a very mysterious film for me. Not that I wanted it to be mysterious, but because I followed a movement of which I had an understanding. Afterwards, a certain set of relations, mysteries, thoughts, problems emanated in that movement. Note that what I'm saying has nothing to do with this film being a random accident. If we don't have a real compulsion, an inner compulsion, even one personally unfathomable, toward a movement, the beginnings of an awareness, an understanding, we have no obligation to undertake a work.

[22] Armenian, 'female deer'. AO

**This brings up the question of Ovanessian's understanding of the audience. As a rule, creating a film, producing a work of art, is the onset of initiating relationships, which begs the question, how can one side of this relationship, who has initiated it himself, feel he does not need the other side?**

> I agree that for any relationship to be genuine it has to issue from a need and a yearning. I felt that. I really felt it and needed to express it. It will establish a relationship with me. There's no need for me to approach anyone behind a fake facade and I don't see a need for anyone to accept or reject it behind a fake facade. The kind of relationship I'm talking about is exactly what holds between the characters in the film as well.

**As an example, Ovanessian mentions the relationship that the husband continues to have with his wife even after her passing.**

### *What is "The Spring"?*

**To know what Ovanessian means by *The Spring*, let's first of all point out that in the book, the spring that's named after The Master spring-builder's wife is at the heart of the events that transpire. Following her betrayal, she is buried under this same spring and it's this same spring that delivers a miracle. Ovaniessian speaks of the spring by underlining:**

> What is a spring, after all? One can walk up to a spring in different circumstances, with a variety of feelings, and quench one's thirst. The film's composition is like a spring. Things are found. They get lost. Everything that's in the film is a means to understanding what occurs in life or in nature from a different angle." *Ovanessian considers people' varied value judgements in making connections an obstacle.* "Understandings vary because values vary. That doesn't mean that someone who reacts, who doesn't like the film, is a worse or less intelligent individual than one who feels differently. But what I find very interesting is that what I believe is real, all of a sudden becomes unreal from other people's point of view."
>
> *Because Ovanessian is better known in theater, some people feel that his work in The Spring/Cheshmeh has affinities with theatre.* "For me, cinema and theatre are completely apart. In theatre, I'm always striving toward in-person relationships and momentary realities that live and die. In cinema, the exact opposite holds. They're dead and they start to live, meaning if cinema doesn't start like that, from ground zero, it cannot be alive. In cinema, we kill and destroy realities by fixing them in discrete images. Later, we patch those together in such a way that they come back to life.

**On symbolism in his film, Ovanessian says he hasn't had any specific interpretations in mind.**

> I utilized numbers a little, not because I was after a symbolic mode but because they seemed so obvious to me. I really saw it that way.

### *Two Years for a Film*

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh was made thanks to the support it received from National Iranian Television, a support that Arby considers "fundamental, . . . the film's backbone — financial security and total freedom in creative development." Thus, he never had to worry that the**

**film might be a commercial failure.**

**It took two years to complete the film. Filming was occasionally delayed due to changing seasons. Ovanessian's trip to Paris to work with Peter Brook left the film at the editing stage. In any event, the film was completed when the Tehran Festival was launching.**

I took the film to the festival myself.

***The Spring*/Cheshmeh premiered at the Tehran Festival and bedlam started right then and there. As to what happened, Ovanessian says:**

> In the beginning, everything looked fine. The goal appeared to be constructive. But unfortunately, what happened after the film was screened was that people's personal issues took center stage and the work itself became peripheral. Things happened behind the scenes that I don't want to talk about at all because they have nothing to do with cinema and the work itself. But one thing became clear to me: If in the past, the meaning and goal of festivals was to genuinely support non-commercial cinema, real cinema, considering the current influence of the power of commerce in cinema, that objective is unfeasible today. I could have never imagined an organization that administers a festival to have a direct influence on supporting or rejecting values.[23] What I've described is not conjecture; it's what I learned directly from several members of the international jury. Many scheduled sessions with critics, and my meeting with members of the jury at their request, did not take place due to influence peddling by some of the festival organizers. The press conference was publicized with distortions, and a chasm opened between me and the audience that only time can fill.

## A Conversation with Arby Ovanessian

By Gillisann Haroian, *Ararat Quarterly* (New York), summer 1987[24]

Arby Ovanessian is an unusual and rising avant-garde theatre and film director who is doing more, single-handedly, to establish an Armenian cinema for the Diaspora than anybody else.

"The great moments of film," he once said, "are those where one succeeds in touching through cinema the internal rhythms of things." He made *Lebbeus Thaddeus* in 1967 and *La Source* (*The Spring*) in 1970-72; both are Armenian in content and style. The latter was featured in the Autumn Festival at Paris and the Venice [Film] Festival, among others.[25]

His chef-d'oeuvre, so far, *Le Tablier brodé de ma mere s'étale dans ma vie* ([*How*] *My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life*) is a decidedly strange but decidedly beautiful film. Ovanessian selected passages from the literature of Vazken Chouchanian and Levon Shant, and the letters of Arshile Gorky (one of Gorky's paintings gave the title to Ovanessian's work). He then spent three years weaving the passages together into one play, which soon became one visually stunning film that in itself is supposed to unify the fragmented Armenian nation.

[23] See Janet Lazarian, "The Theme was Humanity," [interview with Dr. Majid Majidi, Iranian Labor Minister and Chairman of the Jury, First Tehran International Film Festival] Tehran Journal, 2 May 1975.

[24] Original English text reproduced verbatim, with information added in brackets for clarification.

[25] Copy in the collection of the Cinémathèque française.

Set to Armenian music, from ancient sharakans through Komidas to popular songs, the film has an engrossing chain of pure sounds. Its color is flawless, the rhythm nearly so, and the staging excellent. However, the film is plotless, and so symbolist, in an esoteric, avant-garde style, that it can be an alien, difficult, and slow-moving experience to any but cultivated viewers and critics. At least their reviews have been flattering.

Peter Brook wrote, "Arby Ovanessian has made a film of rare beauty. It is an exquisite mosaic. Each detail is lovingly polished, and he invites the spectator to join him in an act of contemplation. He leads one into a world of stillness, of fragmentary images crossed by murmurs of melody and natural sound, a microcosm that slowly opens until we find in its core an epic, the passionate call of an exiled people and the research for reconciliation of the homeless man."[26] In Canada, *Le Devoir*'s critic at the Festival of Modern Cinema wrote on first seeing Ovanessian's work, "*How My Mother's Embroidered Apron* . . . is a unique work, at the same time both disconcerting and fascinating."[27] Finally, the Smithsonian's Free Film Series billed it as an "Armenian Mystery from the Middle Ages to Modern Times" and commented that "the personal and cultural crises of Armenian identity may be the primary focus of this film, but the mythic theatricality of Arby Ovanessian's approach ultimately evokes something even more universal and primal."

The uniqueness of Ovanessian's approach to filmmaking lies not in his producing *My Mother's Embroidered Apron*, but other films as well, to forge a modern Armenian identity for the Diaspora. For example, though filmed in France, *My Mother's Embroidered Apron* is completely in Armenian, and Ovanessian worked hard to create a special "Armenian Diaspora" category for it in the Nancy International Festival. He succeeded, and it was the first time the Armenian Diaspora had been acknowledged as an entity in itself. He has subsequently entered, as a representative of the Diaspora, into a joint venture with the Soviet Armenian and the French cultural ministries to film Tcheugurian's novel *La Monastere* on location in Russian Armenia.

The story deals with a *vartabed*—a hero who saved many orphans from the 1896 massacres. He took them to a poor convent in an isolated region and cared for them until his death. At that point, the attending doctor discovered and gave, in fact, to Tcheugurian the *vartabed*'s intimate journal, which reveals an obsession with the ideas of life, love and death. Tcheugurian turned the journal into a novel which crystalizes a certain mystical and sad but quintessentially Armenian experience. This is what Ovanessian hopes to capture in the film. In his own words, "The Armenian countryside, with its grand spectacle of mountains, of valleys, and of plains, its fascinating colors in nature, its architecture with monasteries, churches, and other buildings, its mysterious and spellbinding world of parchments, manuscripts, and miniatures, all combine with the novel's characters to create a visual work with a quality incontestably and distinctly Armenian."

His other films reflect this same desire to discover the most elemental Armenian experience. *Lebbeus Thaddeus* is a documentary on the yearly pilgrimage Armenians make to the St. Thaddeus cathedral — in the middle of nowhere in Iran, and Ovanessian added that he was attracted to the fairy tale *Parvana* [for his animated film] because "it was very Oriental and very much in spirit with the Armenian soul."

Ovanessian's loyalty both to the Armenian experience and to pure art has brought him criticism from all fronts. First, Ovanessian's presenting the bare truth in black and white about some Armenians in *Thaddeus* earned him severe disapproval from his own community, so much so that the

[26] *Artmada*, presentation catalogue 1985.

[27] For the *Devoir* critic's full statement, see PROLOGUE I, *Appendix/Cinema* 1985 and fn. 54.

film sate, locked tight, in its box for 12 years; it was never known shown. Then, *The Spring* created a scandal at the first film festival of Iran in 1972, for a few reasons. The Iranian community complained about Ovanessian's choice of Armenian enclave as the setting; they objected this flattered the Armenian Christians while vilifying the Muslims. Also, when Ovanessian made a statement that he was more interested in the story's images than plot, he was ridiculed by some critics. Like *My Mother's Apron…*, *The Spring* has many long and silent passages of visual beauty that entrance but simultaneously disconcert the viewer. However, one important critic, Charles Reilly stated that Ovanessian could easily develop into one of the most important directors of modern times.

As for current works, Ovanessian recently flew to the U.S. from his home in Paris to interview the ailing Rouben Mamoulian. His project, sponsored by Louise Simone, is to create a film on the famous director, by interweaving excerpts from his interview with other footage. Singlehandedly, it seems, Ovanessian is succeeding in forging the beginnings of that Armenian cinema for the Diaspora.

Physically, Ovanessian is a small man, even delicate. His features are slight but well-defined; his body is thin but graceful; behind non-descript glasses are his eyes, brown [*sic.*, olive-green] and modest, but clear, betraying faintly that which is a little hard in him; his manner is quiet and controlled, so much so that one would never guess that the exterior houses a noteworthy director. Furthermore, because Ovanessian is reluctant to interpret his work publicly, preferring to let those creations speak to the viewer directly, one may still not guess from casually talking to him, although his comments are intelligently selected and edited even as he speaks. But an extended conversation begins to reveal some ideas of interest and originality beneath the ordinary surface. Below are excerpts from such a conversation.

***On My Mother's Embroidered Apron . . .***

This is the thing: if I want to speak about that [film], it is against what I've been trying to do. It's fragmenting, analyzing, and that's not my job. My function is to unify the Armenians. So, I have tried to unify elements that I think are dispersed, bring them together and make the viewers absorb what has been unified.

I wanted them to hear Armenian, something very complicated. . . The idea of a mosaic was very true (to this idea). It's the whole which makes sense. It's the elements brought together which makes the piece. I don't know that we can speak about the mosaic, Why blue there? In the totality, the whole, it will find its place.

***On My Mother's Apron . . . Being Esoteric***

You [say], 'The film is a visual beauty. Everybody thinks so, but most also think it is inaccessible to them. Do you think this work is inaccessible to the average viewer? If not, why do you think the viewer finds it so esoteric?'

Well, where does that beauty come from? Why can't the viewer enter into the film via the beauty — if *everybody* thinks so, you see, already *everybody* becomes mysteriously related to something via visuals. Then, if the visuals transmit something, that's it. It's good for them. They have a steppingstone to start from. There is already something there; otherwise, the viewer, whom you call the 'average viewer' — I don't know who he is! I don't know anybody with that definition, so the average viewer is esoteric for me!

To give an example of how visuals can develop into a poetic, film expression, which might find sense and meaning on another level, consider a process already registered in the film. A particular shot

came to me [in Paris] during one of the rehearsals when the small model of an Armenian church was put on a stone and a girl started sifting flour on it. It looked as if it were snowing, and nearby some [St. Geneviève] church bells started ringing. . . the original voice of Komidas Vartabed singing *Horovel* came to join it when I had everything on film, and the church bells were "translated" to the bells of St. Etchmiatzin. Does the relation between sifting, singing, and snowing sound esoteric?

In every true art there is always something inaccessible, since a work of art is a carrier of the creative impulse and mystery of life, which by its own mysterious law filters into that particular piece of work and helps it to live and become enriched, again and again.

***On Making Thaddeus***

I wanted to start a kind of filmmaking that would serve as a base for films in the Armenian Diaspora. My main concern was that Armenian films were not Armenian. Virtually, at the time (early 60s), Armenian cinema had ceased to be original. Productions had lost character and in reality, didn't exist even in Soviet Armenia. Later a new movement began in Soviet Armenia.

I was thinking of using something which was basically true in relation to culture and tradition which people are still practicing, using the language and real life as a base, and documenting it. This could function on both levels. . . of documentary and creativity, and that project could be a foundation for building filmmaking in the future. When that time came for the university students to produce that (documentary on St. Thaddeus), I offered my work as a gift.

I used the ancient Armenian, *grabar*, which is the original language and the language of manuscripts up to the 19th century, and then the spoken language, the way people speak today, in different dialects, side by the side. Both exist in the film. For me, they represented the traditional side by side the living elements, the roots and the other one.

The action of the pilgrimage itself, and the building itself which was, again, another reflection of the same quality, side by side, marked the temporal and the other, more out of time, which survives longer.

***On the Censorship of Thaddeus***

The [people who] commissioned the film were pleased with it, but the organizers of the pilgrimage thought the film was negative. There was a conflict between the two parties. I made a documentary observing what was there. They thought the film was made to criticize them. This was not the case.

Suddenly they were seeing an image they had not seen before. If you see an image — somebody has photographed you, and you were not prepared to be photographed — it shows the truth. If you are broad-minded, you accept the document. You live with that. If you are not broad-minded, you are very closed, and you start thinking negatively. . .

We are a nation who hasn't grow up.

***On the Medium of Film***

Film, fortunately, can continue to live in time, and if it is made with that notion to mark the time, to be true to its time, and to go beyond the time, then the film is there, the *creation* is there. Otherwise, it's just a commercial venture. You touch a point, you gain the money, and after five years you cannot have a look at that film because it's dated.

I'm not interested in that kind of cinema. I'm interested in that kind which absolutely has to mark the time it was made, and then go beyond that time to function, to speak, the way our manuscripts

are living the longest, the way our architecture is living. If I think traditionally, the pulse is there because it has a background. It has a mother.

***On the Armenian Cinema***

The question is how this heritage — scientific, historical, poetical — can function as film language. This is not necessarily like filmmaking in other countries. It needs a language; it has to be discovered. Otherwise, why speak Armenian and not English, say? Because the vibrations are different, the sounds are different, the sensibilities are different. Not just for the sake of being different, but in terms of space, geographically, they are touching something else. The experience has its own sign language, its own harmony. All this has to be brought together.

The whole idea (of My Mother's Apron) was to touch something which goes into this question of liberating what we can say is an experience Armenian.

***On his Childhood***

We were living in Teheran but visiting my grandmother in Julfa/Isfahan. There were these marvelous, ancient cathedrals. Early morning you could hear the churches' bells. Very pure, very clear. In one of those churches, I saw this little hand, a relic. They were going and kissing it. That little hand touched me very much, my curiosity.

I took my hand, traced it, cut this, and made my little corner. I made everybody in the house come in and venerate the corner. My aunt's husband, who had saved the orphans [during the massacres], was the principal of our school. He got angry and said, "You cannot do this! This is not true!"

For me, *as a child*, there was no difference. Why this one [*sic.,* the other one] is true and not that [*sic.,* this] one? I couldn't make the separation.

[Also,] I was doing theatre, puppet plays, acting out fairy tales. When I was 12, I wanted to study film. My parent didn't say no, which was very amazing. I'm grateful. When I was 18, I started making the scenery for theatre. It developed naturally.

***On Stone (used much in his films)***

That's what Armenian art is.

In life, stone is most dense. In our culture, we have been built with it. We have built our churches. We haven't built our home with that. What we have which has survived time is only the Churches. We don't have palaces. That doesn't mean they were not building them, but they were building them in a different way. It's the church, a few university compounds, and fortresses [that remain].

[On *khatchkars*]: The weight of the stone has been transformed. When you look at a *khatchkar*, it looks much lighter. Armenia was a country very much related to stone — the mountains. And the nature has been very beautiful and very fragile, so that fragile quality is there, too, the design and lightness. So, it [our culture] has a functional relationship to the stone, not decorative. The stone is not there to decorate; it's there to function.

***On Komitas***

. . . the most important cultural figure we have had in the 20th century. He touched profoundly the Armenian spirit. He has created without rejecting the traditional; he has gone beyond the tradition by presenting the tradition and transmitting something on the creative level, which is not just parrot repeating wat de had received.

***On the Genocide***

The question? If the Armenian nation has died in the massacres, have they died consciously? Or are they massacred and become victims? What attitude have we to take?

***On the Future***

We cannot always suffer on the same level. There's no vision. The structure won't allow the life to breath. There has to be a space, the way we allow a room for children and then we give paint and they make things, then we give paint and they make things, then things start to manifest.

# Cinema
# III

# Images / Cinema

**1964. *The Mask***

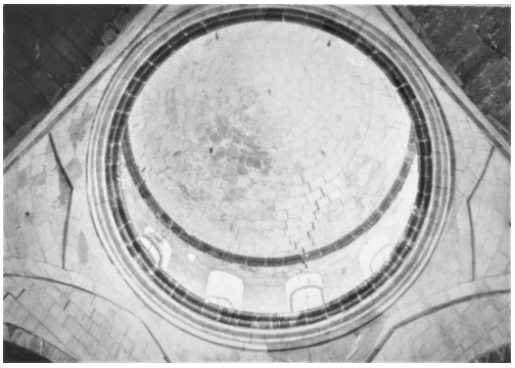
**1965.** ***Parvana***

**1966. *Mrs. Ahou's Husband* – Picnic sequence**

## 1967. *Lebbæus Who Was Named Thaddæus* (documentary)

**Day One:** Site and monument before pilgrims arrive

**Day Two:** Arrival of pilgrims and their interaction with the site prior to the religious ceremonies

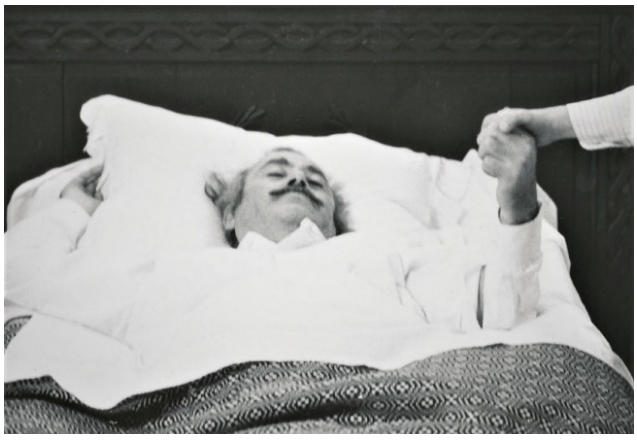


**Day Three**: Prayer, animal sacrifice, Holy Communion, baptism, pilgrims depart.
Children from nearby villages forage for scraps of leftover food. Last, the monument in solitude in uninhabited landscape.

L-R: Arby Ovanessian (director), Edward Abrahamian (assistant), Soghomon Minassian (cinematographer)

**1970-1972. *The Spring*/Cheshmeh**

The [Master's] Mother and grandson crafting paper dart.



The Master Spring Builder on his deathbed

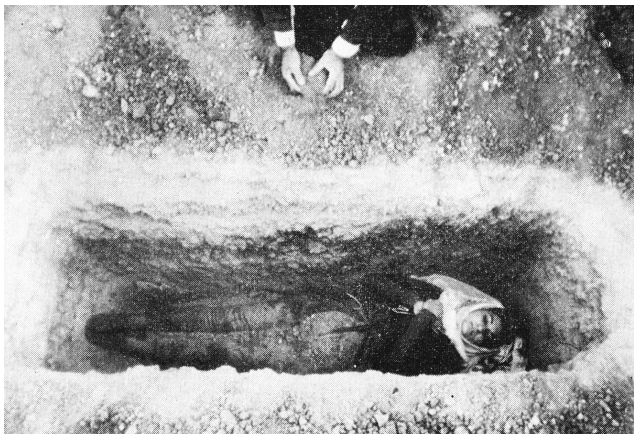
Friends ritually memorialize The Master

The Vegetable Farmer's suicide

The Goldsmith's Son and The Master's Wife

Muslim elders sit in judgment

The Master's Wife at the gravesite of her firstborn

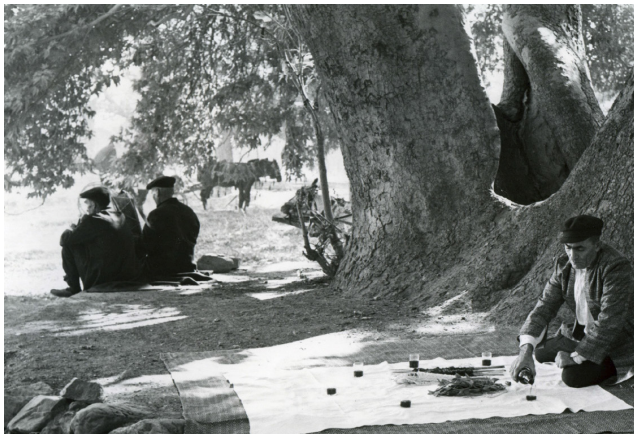


The Master buries his wife

The Master's Wife in death

The young lover follows the voice of a girl singing

The Goldsmith's Son begs to be killed

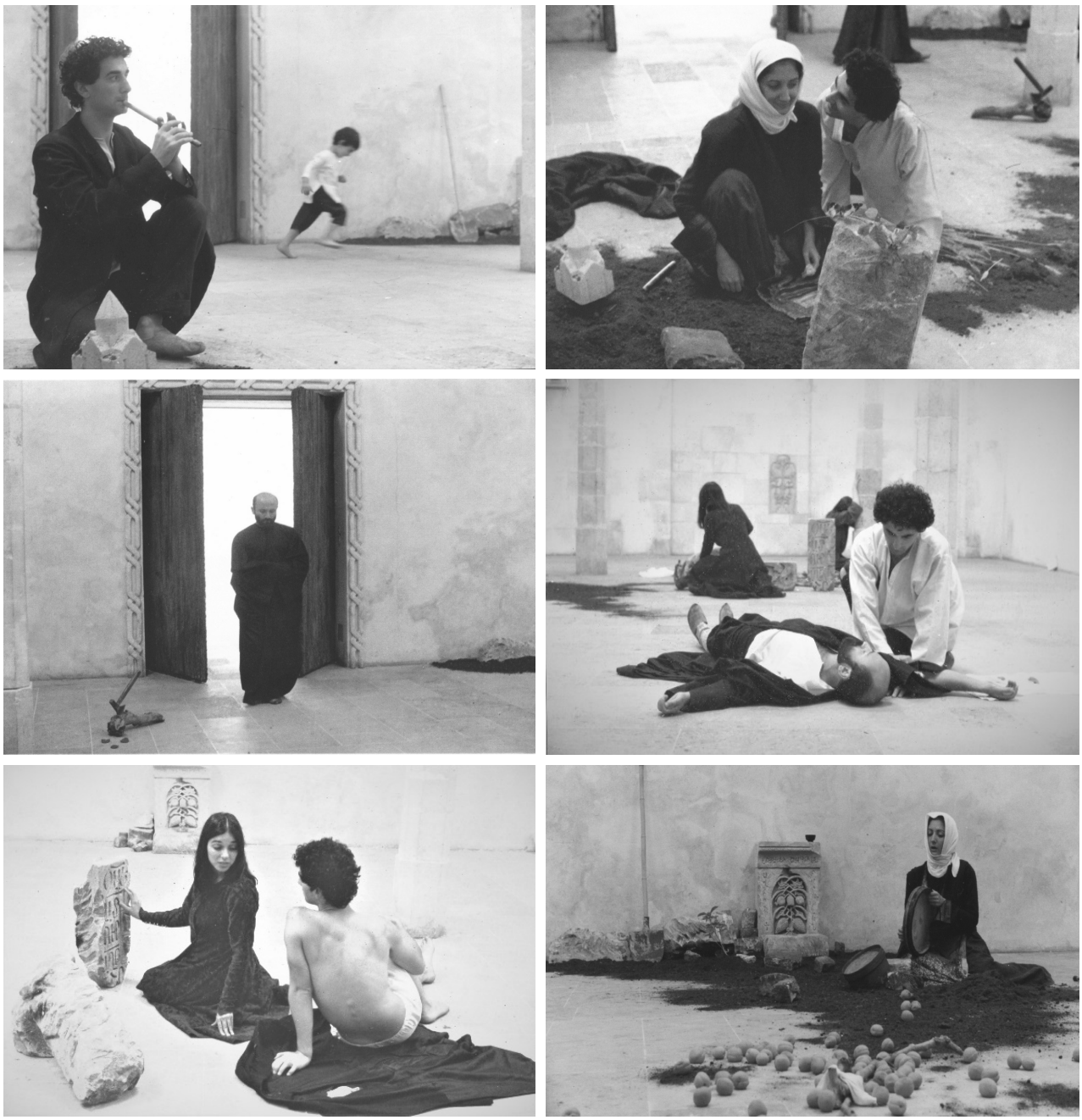


The Bridge Builder ritually memorializes his lost friends

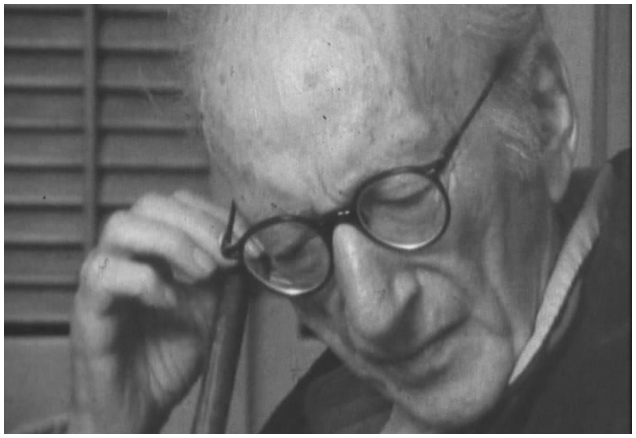
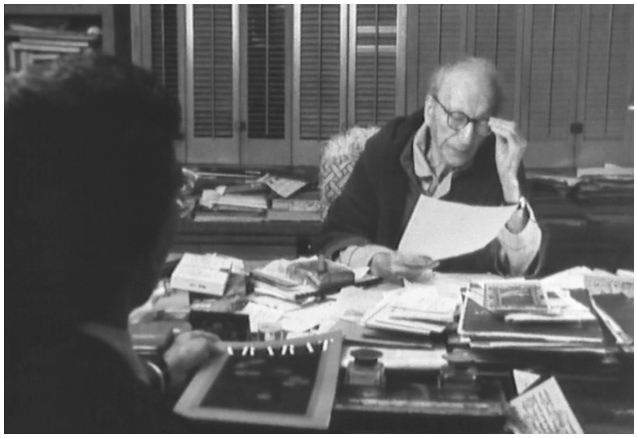
**1976. *Salamān va Absāl***

Test shot: Cistern at Portuguese fortress, Hormoz Island

**1985.** ***How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life***



**1986-1987.** ***Rouben Mamoulian 88*: *Readings, Reflections and Reminiscences*** **(documentary)**

**2007.** ***Haratch 83*** **(documentary)**

# Epilogue

# Letter to Majid Lashkari[28]

The collection of interviews and the other sections of your book shed light on the life and growth of the works in the past. I hope the contents of this letter may clarify some of the points and questions for which you did not find an answer in the course of your research.

The result of your efforts and the outcome of your research into our experience is now part of the historical record of the development of theatre and cinema in Iran.

*

*By the power of the source of the sun*

*Granite in the mountain turns into gold*[29].

*

One day when I was a child, I was making a puppet for my plays. I noticed that when its limbs were built to certain proportions and connected, the puppet found a balance and center of gravity that let me move them with a slight nudge of my finger and bring the puppet to life.

A reaction is a living force.

What we see as light issues from reaction.

Light and sound issue from the energy of reaction.

Reaction begets time.

*

One day at Chaplin Film,[30] I was using watercolors to design a space in which to stage *Research*/Pazhuheshi. The five-year-old child of a friend was playing with some paper and pencils in a corner of the studio. Suddenly, she ran toward me in silence and held out a piece of black paper.

Surprised, I asked, "What is that?"

She said, "The night sun."

I looked at it carefully again – she had drawn a circle on the black paper with lines projecting away from it.

Her insight and vision became the source of my work on *Research*/Pazhuheshi.

A difficulty was resolved and at that very moment, the secret mystery of a stirring inside me

[28] Once I finished interviewing the actors, collaborators, and critics, I sent Ovanessian my manuscript along with some queries. He wrote this letter in answer to some of my quetions.

[29] Badiʻul-Zaman Abdʻul-Vaseʻ Jabali, 12th c poet of Gharjistan east of Herat and home to the Persian speaking Hazara.

[30] Film tudio founded by the Minassian Brothers in Tehran after Ebrahim Golestan's closed.

found an answer.

"I swear in the name of the God of the Kaaba, I am relieved."[31]

For insight and intuition, one must attain the pristine vision of this intuitive child.

I wasn't surprised that on the long night of the play's final rehearsal at Hafeziyeh Stadium in Shiraz, the moment Khogāshi walked on the stage, dawn broke on the sound of his first utterance and the sky turned aflame on the horizon.

Theatre and cinema's main concern should be to show the imperceptible and the invisible. The question is how to be in communion with that and how to give it form.

A unique and personal experience is the most important path to insight, and the sole source of our creativity. The subconscious is the only resource and wellspring of our inner life.

Shaking off the ego's tyranny and consciously submitting to the subconscious clears the way to the heart and to direct perception. Insight and intuition come from the intelligence of the heart and lead to direct perception and hearing. Such a state can only be communicated to another person through living phenomena.

Though it may seem irrational, vague, and inadmissible, the sound of silence in fact finds its own language and function. Silence is eloquent in nature and intrinsically essential for us.

*

It's essential to perceive phenomena differently, by non-rational means.

When Eastern artists (trained in their own traditions) choose nature, objects, humans and animals as their subject, being concentrated inwardly, they don't merely perceive their appearances but grasp their presence and their movements in the moment as well. Their sight is both present and absent and their brushstroke registers the unity of this dichotomy on paper.

To display or perform a movement that is crossing their soul, actors should not try to give different shapes to their body but train it so that it is subject to the interactions within their inner state, so that it may beget a form that is the product of the inner exchanges and a reflection of their soul in their body. Along such a path, it is only the soul that shapes the body and not the individual will or mimesis. Such a form and framework are born from external silence, internal silence, and mental silence. An actor's body has to be trained so it does not block this silence.

*

Every writing has one external and seven internal meanings.

The question is, which one of those do the director and the actors want or are able to grasp, affirm, interpret, visualize, and present? Which of the text's internal meanings can become tangible, communicated, and understood through their inner insight?

Interpretation of words?

Relating, reactivating the essence of the original writing, getting to meaning, to image and character, is the principal occupation of theatre. Each writing has its own form and image. The object of the director and the group is to discover and present that. Look at the photographs of the

[31] For the source of the quotation see Theatre IV, fn. 160.

productions in your publication; each reflects a distinct atmosphere that illustrates the essence of the play, and no two productions share the same mold.

*First exercise*:

To establish a relationship between the intellect and the emotions in the subconscious, while reading the dialogue of a play, take a pause after every three words. While on pause, do not evaluate or analyze what you have read. Continue casually without any other interference. The exercise will function subconsciously and bear fruit in the future. When performing on stage, these pauses should not be taken when speaking the lines; this is preparatory work.

By utilizing an active silence, the reader gradually causes their inner silence to vibrate, which will automatically bring them to radiate externally. If an actor discovers and understands this function and submits to it, silence will actively awaken and activate an inner understanding and the stimulants of spontaneous forces within them. From then on, theatre will turn into spiritual research for them, the place to know oneself and others.

*

The source of the imagination is distinct from the source of logical thinking. One cannot create solely by resorting to analysis and exposition. The wellspring of creativity lies in intuition; its output is physical. What is sensed through intuition is rooted in the subconscious. For creativity to take place, the imagination has to act freely and take strength from varied resources. Relying on logical thinking – analysis and exposition – alone blocks the stimulating and productive energies in the director's and the actors' subconscious from surfacing. When engaged in rational work, one has to utilize the special source and resources of the imagination's stimulating energies to produce an equilibrium so as to elicit a response from the subconscious.

Creativity in the artistic domain requires focusing on this subject. Everything, all character types exist inside us. But one has to hunt for them through concentration and capture them. Their prototype is under the control and regency of the soul alone, and it is only by their intermediary that a role comes into communion with us. When an actor is concentrated, the image of his/her body is born from the concept, the goal, source and subject, and works with that contingency alone. Whatever is needed, whatever is needed for the role (thought, speech, and action) is continuously born from the actor. To understand that, there is no need for analysis and exposition.

Productive exercises are those that use and execute the power of the imagination and the intellect side-by-side. Our customary habits are the opposite; most of the time we want to approach the work before us only through reasoning, analysis and exposition.

*

After each exercise, ask yourself:

1. What did I concentrate on?
2. What did I pay attention to?
3. What did my attention and concentration produce (what did I do)?

In regards the third question, the director's outlook and role (by definition) have a presence and become important. It's the director that notices the actor's confusion and lack of communion and concentration.

*

To develop the actor's capacity for direct perception, they need to be led through (exposed to) targeted topics and exercises. Not every text is suitable for such work. Chekhov is among the rare writers whose works provide considerable opportunities for cultivating direct perception in the actor. Chekhov's view of people's behavior is non-judgmental. Such a perspective bears a direct path to the soul and the spirit; and if actors succeed in freeing themselves from the controlling confines of their customary habits, they can unearth and sense their inner silence through Chekhov's writings and gradually get close to their intuition and unconscious instincts.

The actor's main efforts have to be at the service of rendering their perception and inner efforts operational. Theatre is a means to gaining self-knowledge, the self with itself and the self with the other. For that, Chekhov is the best choice and unique.

*

The choice of *The Cherry Orchard* for the City Players Group when it first formed was born out of a need and a desire to fill a cultural and educational gap. Despite the then-current difficulties, the actors learned — owing to the understanding that was gradually achieved through work — why and how to avoid showing off to attain an inner peace and quality of performance of a different kind. As a result, they grew to display and reflect a different kind of energy, feeling, and beauty when performing.

Like flocks of birds that suddenly fly from one place to another and swoop down together to land, they, too, in effect flew together but didn't have to flap their wings together in a similar, simultaneous, synchronized way. Because as a group, they were not connected together with screws and bolts like inanimate parts of a machine. They were being trained to control and guide their bodies and feelings and arrive at direct perception.

*

In a play, every character is only what it is, what it says, and what it does.

The director should lead in such a way that the actor grasps his/her dialogues and actions directly from the source. To animate the lines that the playwright has written for the role, all that actors need do is restrict themselves to the verbs in the text and concentrate on that.

I have devised some exercises to that end:

1. Write down all the lines of your role in sequence as a monologue without consideration of the other actors' lines.

*Then,*

- Read it a few times silently.
- Immediately read it aloud.
- Learn it by heart and then repeat it, first silently, and then aloud.

*Next,*

2. Write down only the verbs of your role in sequence as a monologue and repeat the steps and the order of the first exercise; this time act out the verbs.
3. You can do the same exercises with adjectives, nouns, and other terms in your lines.

That way, the actor gets to sense and know the emotional, physical, and mental scope of their role. With requisite concentration and impetus, the actor can animate their character vis-à-vis other characters.

By using components of the text in these exercises and focusing on them, the actor becomes one with the image and the scope of the role, comes to know their actions, and grasps the essence of the original writing; in sum, the actor learns to eliminate extraneous movements and irrelevant actions from their behavior.

For the work to crystallize, the first exercise (lines as a monologue) should be performed with the entire ensemble of roles before moving on to the components of the lines. These exercises will bring the actor's disparate thoughts into a coherent whole. In regards the character, the actors will stop feeling lost, and their gaze, movement, diction, and behavior will become fluid.

*

While performing a play, it is only the character that should breathe, have a presence, and blend with the audience's attention and comprehension. What has come to life onstage belongs neither to the actor nor to the viewer. The character has not been born from them alone. It is the result of interactions that has intermixed with the vision of the director — who is invisible on the stage — and along with visible and invisible stage components, in a space and atmosphere that encompasses the audience, has now activated the text.

In theatre, time past has to be transformed to time present. The past has no meaning in theatre. The work of a director or actor that is bound by the external meanings of words lacks creative energy, which immediately plants the audience in a space where time is dead.

Theatre is presence in time present.

Without understanding that, no theatre can be expressive and alive. It is no surprise that in ancient Greece, theatre was defined as a 'Place to bear witness'.

*

Remember and bear witness as well that cinematography is a child of the 19th century. The original reasons for its existence had nothing to do with its artistic potential. Before developing into an art form in the 20th century, it was first a technological ingenuity. In fact, its invention was very much related to a function of the human organism: our mind retains every single image that we see for one-tenth of a second before it disappears.

Here, the persistence of the image and its relation to a certain duration are the main operational features of an apparatus that was able to register successively "disappearing" images and "resurrect" them through the movement of light. Thus, cinema preserves on film the short-lived "one-tenth of a second" image, brings us to "see" the passage of time, and establishes a relationship between our conscious and unconscious mind.

*

When I returned to Iran toward the end of spring 1966, the Cultural Council of the Association of Armenian University Graduates in Tehran contacted me and asked if I would be willing to make a documentary film on The Black Church/*Qara Kelissa* for them. Until then, no professional film had ever been made in Armenian outside of Soviet Armenia; the invitation was an opportunity for that to happen in Iran. Pleased and eager, I accepted the invitation on condition that

they cover the cost of negative film but not interfere in the work itself. I would personally cover all travel expenses, equipment rental, fees for the cameraman and crew, as well as all lab work, to ensure my total freedom.

Cinematographer Soleiman (Soghomon) Minassian (Forouq Farrokhzad's *The House Is Black,* 1963, and Ebrahim Golestan's *Brick and Mirror,* 1964) agreed to film The Black Church for me at no charge; in return, I would teach film animation — which was my specialty — to his personnel at Chaplin Film, and make a number of animated commercials for him for free. [32]

It took the Council a while to acquire raw film. They were finally able to get 2,500 meters of 35 mm negative film from Kodak as a free gift. By then, the pilgrimage season was over, however, and filming had to be postponed to the following year.

Filming *Lebbæus Who Was Named Thaddæus* lasted three days. I had not been to Azarbaijan Province or The Black Church before. For me, the journey was like a pilgrimage to a sacred place. I oriented my gaze to be a testament to what was happening inside and outside myself.

Over three consecutive days, my shooting plan went in step with whatever was transpiring before my eyes.

*Day One*: The site and the monument before the pilgrims' arrival.

*Day Two*: The arrival of the pilgrims and their relationship with the site prior to the religious ceremonies.

*Day Three*: The animal sacrifice, performance of religious ceremonies, the pilgrims' departure, the arrival of poor children from nearby villages to collect scraps of food left over by the pilgrims, and last, the monument's solitude in nature and the uninhabited plain.

By projecting the captured images at a certain speed, we can "resurrect" our short-lived experience. Thus, for me, cinema — as opposed to theatre — is "writing movement" with light.

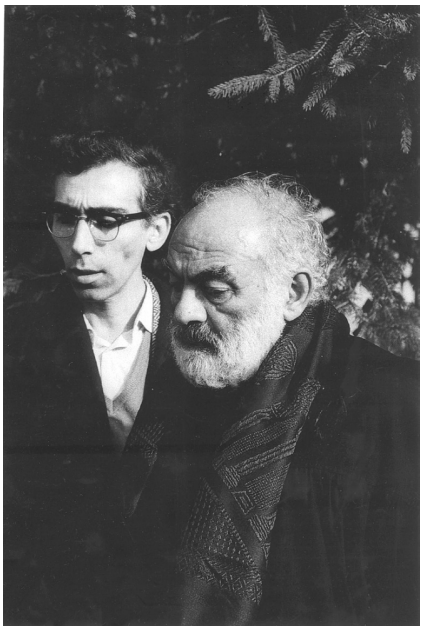
Arby Ovanessian

30 July 2011

[32] The short commercials were shown in theatres in Iran during 1969-1970.

# Portraits

Sergei Parajanov pencil drawing of Ovanessian, signed in turquoise pen with Parajanov's index and middle fingerprints stamped on the chin, 1973

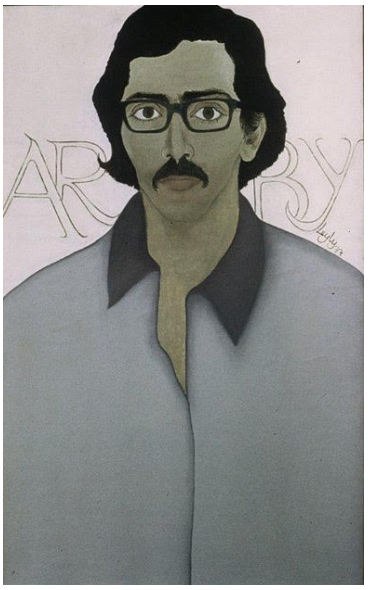


Sergei Parajanov and Arby Ovanessian at the gravesite of Andrei Tarkovsky, Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois Russian Cemetery, Paris, 1988

Sergei Parajanov doodles in memory of Ovanessian's stealthy acquisition of a copy of The Color of Pomegranates in Tehran in 1973 and its first release outside USSR. Inscribed in Russian: Arby-Sergei, Paris, 1988

Bijan Saffari, ink on paper, 1973

Jerry Pollack, oil on canvas, 1973



Leyly Matin-Daftari, acrylic, 1977

Bijan Saffari, colored pencil, 1977

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